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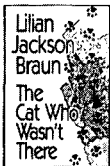
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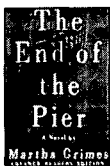
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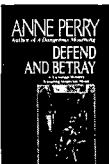
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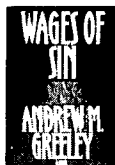




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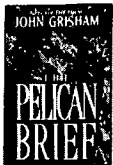
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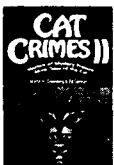
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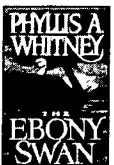
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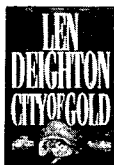
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Two writers are new to us this time; we'd like to introduce them. Floridian Jackie Walsh is *almost* an altogether new writer, having had one previous story published in EQMM, our sister magazine. "The Wrong Box," her second story, is a delightful tale.

Ms. Walsh comes from Richmond, Virginia, has been a freelance photographer (briefly), a computer programmer, a publicist and in-house writer for an insurance company ("a miserable job"), and a chambermaid in a London hotel ("short-lived job but fascinating"). We bet.

Ruth A. Gerik, author of "User Unfriendly," her first story, was born in Massachusetts, brought up in Mississippi, now lives in Texas. Spent

twenty-three years in the navy, retiring from the service as a Senior Chief Navy Counselor. She has begun a second career as a teacher of literature, is presently working on an M.A., with her eye on a Ph.D.; she teaches freshman composition. In her spare time she sings "with choruses of Sweet Adelines, Inc., an international organization of women who sing barbershop."

Among the other stories in this issue... a new Phillip Bethancourt story from C. M. Chan, a new Bannon tale set in Puerto Rico from Kenneth Gavrell, the engaging "Doilies in the Dianthus" from Mike Drummond, and the story of how Bertie Wooster and Jeeves found each other.

Happy spring.

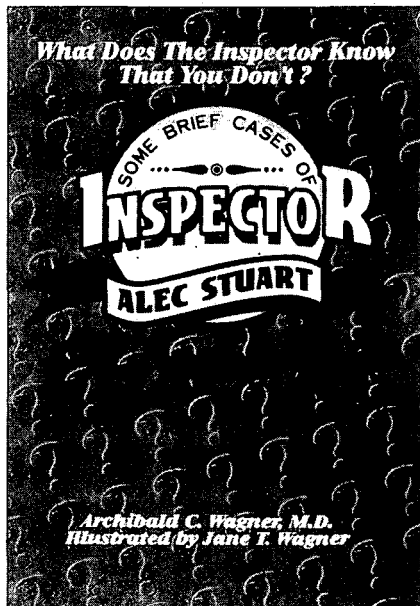
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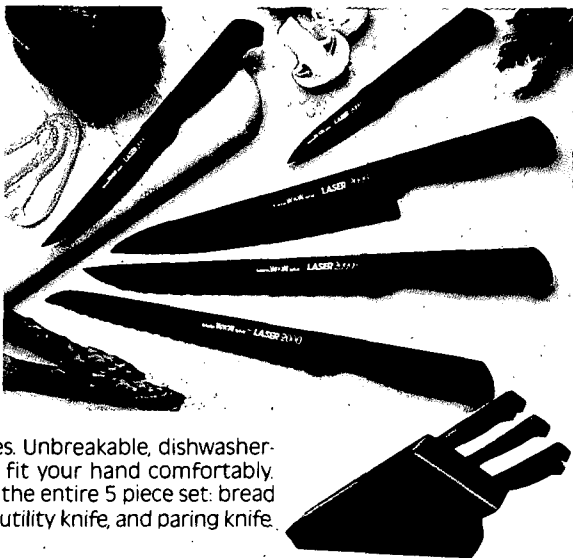
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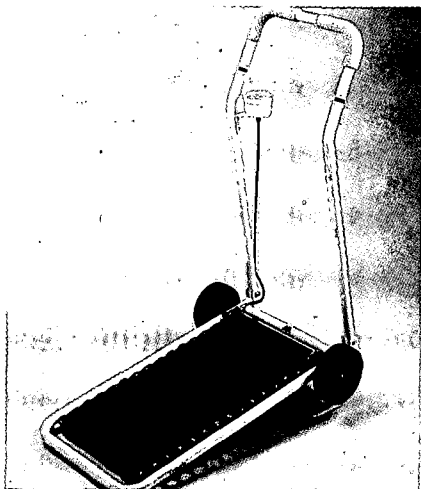
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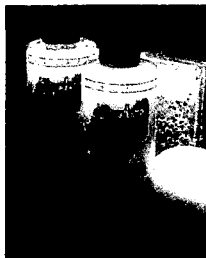
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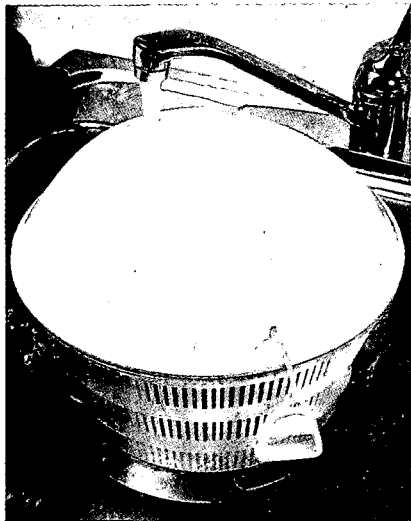


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FICTION

Wake the Dead

by Janet O'Daniel



Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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Summer on St. Anne's Island was a time of languor and lassitude. The air, thick with moisture, became thicker with mosquitoes. Spanish moss hung from the live oaks, and crape myrtle flamed unexpectedly in the heavy greenness. Alligators dozed in the shallow lakes and pools. People living in the big new condominiums hugged their air conditioning or else, insanely, went out on one of the four golf courses and played as many holes as they could stagger through. Then they returned, dangerously red and sweating, courting coronaries, to have drinks in the clubhouse.

Certainly it was no time to think about moving a cemetery.

Some people, even without air conditioning, behaved more sensibly. Monday Deveaux, who still refused to sell the acre where her small house stood, tended her garden early in the morning, or sometimes went out gathering mullein, poke leaves, and life-everlasting in the fields and marshes beyond the new buildings, returning to brew them and put the distillations up in Mason jars. But Monday moved slowly, knowing about the summer and its secrets. Thrashing around, beating against it, thinking yourself immune to its heavy strangling grip, was a form of madness. The summer held wrath and vengeance. It could send men wild with jealousy and vindictiveness, and what it did to the women—Monday shook her head at the very thought.

Monday Deveaux wore two neat cotton dresses, one over the other, as she had done all her life, winter and summer. She drank tea with mint leaves in it and rocked on her porch, and people who came to visit her and to ask her advice sat and rocked with her.

"They still after you?" Hassie Blaine sipped her mint tea and eyed the palmetto by the porch. Its fronds hung limp in the motionless afternoon.

Monday nodded and rocked. "They don't be giving up that easy. That man Gillam, he come around. Shake his finger at me, but smiling all the while. Say, I gone get you sooner or later, Miz Deveaux."

Hassie nodded. "That smile hide a world of wickedness, what I say."

It was true that Gillam treated Monday with more respect than he had in the beginning. When he first came to St. Anne's, he had been all smiles and handshakes as he offered huge sums to buy up the holdings of those whose kin had lived on the barrier island for a hundred, maybe two hundred years. And a good many of them

had taken the money, turning their backs on the piney woods, the salt marshes, the quiet lagoons, and the birdsong. They had headed for the mainland world of McDonald's and malls and never looked back.

A few, like Monday, had stayed on. Monday shook her head at Mr. Gillam's offer each time he made it, and his smile had faded as he grew angrier and angrier. He had painted a dark picture of the future, predicting things like ballooning taxes, but she still shook her head. So he had gone ahead and built his great condominiums, and now Monday's little house and garden were in their shadow.

"You are living," Mr. Gillam once told her, "on an acre of the most valuable land along the South Carolina coast. You could be a rich woman, Mrs. Deveaux."

Monday shook her head. She would not share with this loud white man any of her reasons for not selling. He wouldn't understand, and she disliked wasting words—seeing them float out into the air and become lost, parts of herself that might somehow be captured and made to work against her.

"Sooner or later," he said. But there was a new respect in his voice.

Monday took care not to show that it troubled her when he talked like that, but sometimes, especially during these long thick days when men were apt to run mad, she worried.

Today, for example, Hassie had brought her the news about the cemetery. Monday's heart turned cold.

"What you mean—movin'? You mean really movin'? All them bones?"

"They say so."

"Can they do that?" But Monday felt fear. These people with their money and their huge machines, it was hard to say what they could or couldn't do. Hassie shrugged and wiped her face with her handkerchief.

"I got two husbands buried there," Monday said. "I just got 'em around to where they're easy with each other. If those machines go digging there, they're apt to fly off every which way. Cause a wicked lot of trouble, that would."

Hassie nodded in sympathy. "Dor' I know."

Monday had seen Hassie off with a jar of mullein tea (good for fighting off a summer cold) and then had sat for a few more minutes rocking alone on her tiny porch, feeling the late afternoon breeze

spring up from the sea. It freshened every day about this time. You had to sit quietly and face into it in order to get the benefit. Monday did so for a time, but her thoughts were unquiet today. Presently she got up and put on her large straw hat and started walking along the road in the direction of the small wooden gatehouse that stood at the entrance to the Windswept Condominiums.

The gatehouse had a windowbox of red geraniums and ivy and a sign that said Visitors Only. Monday trudged up to it.

"Hi there, Momma," the man in the uniform said when he saw her. Monday didn't exactly hate him. He wasn't mean, although he had small eyes.

"Going to the cemetery," she said.

"Awful hot day to be walking," he said.

"I don't pay it much mind."

He handed her a card with a number on it and the word *Visitor*, and just for a little bit Monday did feel a mean red anger at the sight of it. She'd been here hustling the marshes for crabs, digging in the rich oyster beds, watching the egrets fishing, long before the Windswept Corporation and Mr. Gillam arrived with their great yellow machines. She didn't see how anybody who was here first could rightly be called a visitor.

She took the card and nodded to him, then walked on. Houses with big green lawns lined the road now, most of them discreetly half-hidden behind banks of pines, magnolias, azaleas, loquat, wax myrtles. The bigger buildings, the giant condominiums, were off to the right where the sea was. Mr. Gillam, who had built it all, called it a tasteful combination of lifestyles. Monday plodded on until she came to the cemetery. It was enclosed by an iron fence and an iron gate, and in order to enter it, she had to slip the card into a slot in a certain way she'd learned, until the latch slipped open. Then she could walk inside.

A plaque on the fence explained that the cemetery had been in use back in slave days when there'd been a great plantation here, and had been used ever since as well, although it had never gotten really crowded since the population had dropped off after the twenties when the boll weevil came and spelled death to the fabled sea island cotton crops and a whole way of life vanished forever.

Anson and Solomon were buried side by side under a huge live oak tree. The tree was so strong and deeply embedded that Monday looked now and then to make sure the graves weren't being disturbed by root growth. But they were still straight and level, the

two stones not even tilting. Monday thought likely the oak roots were detouring around those bones, knowing it to be a holy place. She put a hand against the bark and said to the tree, "Afternoon, Grandfather." Then she lowered herself with much care and sat between the headstones.

She closed her eyes and waited for them to start the conversation, but neither spirit said a word, and presently Monday opened her eyes.

A young woman was standing there staring at her.

There was very little that surprised Monday any more, so she simply sat and regarded the young woman. Only a girl, Monday thought. Her face was pale and sweaty, her hair mouse-colored and lank. Her eyes were amber brown, and so large and luminous that they dominated her small pointy face. Monday wondered what she was doing here. Tourists—guests, they called them—came sometimes on buses and looked at the headstones, leaning over and tracing the names with their fingers, sometimes writing things in notebooks. But this girl didn't look like one of them. She had a worried, scattery look. Also, she was pregnant.

Monday felt the girl's thoughts wandering around in the still air. She could tell they were thin, unhappy thoughts that drifted off and wound up nowhere.

"Ever shoot an alligator?" Monday said.

It seemed to do the trick. The girl's thoughts swiveled around and came to a point as she concentrated on Monday and frowned. She shook her head slowly.

"Best place to get 'em's right between the eyes," Monday said. "I got me a few. I never weighed more'n ninety-eight pounds, either. Got married when I was fifteen—weighed ninety-eight pounds that day, still do."

Now for the first time she could feel Anson and Solomon prodding at her, jealous and annoyed. She spoke sharply.

"You two settle down. I gone get to you in a minute. Fetched and toted for the two of you all them years—now I'm having a little talk on my own time. You just lie quiet."

The girl's big eyes widened. She glanced at the two stones. One said Anson King and the other Solomon Deveaux.

"Anson was the one I married when I was fifteen," Monday said. "I was forty when he died, and Solomon, he was waitin' to sweetmouth me, couldn't've been more'n a week later. We was married twenty-five years, same as me and Anson."

"You come here to visit them?" the girl said.

Monday nodded. "How about you?" she asked.

The girl's hair had fallen forward. She used her two hands to tuck it behind her ears. Her arms were thin, like a child's.

"I walk over here sometimes, that's all." She reached into the pocket of her limp cotton sundress and produced a card like Monday's.

"You live in the big building?" Monday asked.

The girl nodded. Lived there but wanted to die. Monday could feel the girl's desperate thoughts beating through the heavy air.

"You got a name, child?" Monday asked, gentling her voice.

"Ellie Gillam."

It flashed through Monday with a jolt. She patted the grass next to her and said, "Ground's nice and cool. Why don't you sit a little?"

The girl sat with some difficulty and leaned on Anson's stone. If he didn't like it, he could just go scratch, Monday thought. The child looked wore out.

"I know a man named Gillam," Monday said.

"You probably know my father-in-law. He's the one built all this." Ellie motioned with a weak gesture. "I'm married to his son Randy. He works for the company."

Monday knew who he was. A young man with reddish hair under a yellow hard hat. Big and muscled and with the beginning of a belly. Hard-set eyes that could narrow down to slits.

"You're not from around here," she said.

"No, ma'am. I'm from upstate. I used to work for the Gillam company in Spartanburg—that's where their offices are. I took a secretarial course, that's how I got the job."

Monday didn't say that she'd read most of this already in the girl's head. Other things she saw dimly, but she was sure they were true. A mean-spirited father. No, two of them, for Gillam had likely refused to pay out any money to get his son off the hook. Marry her—good enough for you, he would have said. Teach you a lesson. And the girl's father, turning his back on her. Two hard men.

"I didn't let anybody talk me around. I mean, I want the baby," Ellie Gillam said.

Monday nodded. That was the other corner of the problem, her wanting the baby. So now she was here, shut up in the great tower of concrete and glass that stood where the shorebirds had once

sheltered. And so lonesome for company that she crept out to walk among the dead.

The girl said, "I heard they're going to move this burying ground. Can they do that?"

It was the same question Monday had asked of Hassie.

"Don't know can they or can't they," Monday said.

"They want it out of the way, Randy says. They want to build a gift shop and tearoom here. He says it would be discreet."

It would be haunted, Monday thought. Anybody should know that much.

"He says they're going to move—everybody—from here to someplace over that way." Again the feeble gesture of a thin arm. "Over beyond the golf course."

Monday shuddered at the thought.

"He had some trouble about it, though," the girl went on. "Randy's daddy. He had to get him a permit, and it's held things up. I guess it's all worked out now."

Somebody hold his hand out, get paid off, that's how it works out, Monday thought, knowing the way such things were done. The talk about moving the burying ground distressed her. She changed the subject.

"When-about you gone have that baby?"

"Pretty soon now. Week or two."

"Mercy. You don't hardly look big enough. Still, I was small myself, like you."

"How many did you have?"

"Three. All grown up and flew off." And Anson Junior, the oldest, just starting to collect his Social Security. Now there was a thought to bring the years down on her head.

"When I have my baby, I'll talk to him all day, and I'll bring him here for walks. Or wherever they move it to."

And that'll make the pain go away, Monday heard as she listened to the girl's thoughts.

"Where do you live?" Ellie Gillam asked suddenly.

"Out yonder," the old woman answered. "That little house that sits outside the gate and down the road."

"Oh, is *that* your house! I've seen that place. That must be the one Randy's daddy talks about. He wants to buy it."

"For sure he does," Monday nodded.

"But you won't sell it to him."

"No."

Something stirred in the girl's face, the faintest trace of puzzlement as if this was something she had to figure out. Then presently she said, "Maybe I'll come and visit you sometime."

"You do that," Monday said.

After the girl left, Monday remained, troubled by a day that had brought dark thoughts and uncertain prospects. She mentioned some of her worries to Solomon and Anson, but it was pretty much as it had been in life. They were anxious to talk about their own woes and paid little mind to what she said.

The following week Monday made a point of going to the cemetery every day because she wanted to know what was going on. The whole matter was a worrisome weight around her neck. One day as she approached the place, she saw that the high iron fence was being dismantled in sections. Some of it lay on the ground, yanked out of its earthen pinnings. A backhoe stood nearby with a man in a yellow hard hat leaning against it. Monday's heart began to thump and pound nervously. Mr. Gillam himself was there, and so was his son Randy. Both of them stood with arms folded across their chests, looking a world alike, Monday thought, although the father had more of a belly. He called out orders to two workmen who were sweating at yanking out the fence, and when Monday came up, she knew he saw her but he paid her no mind, just went on with his quick sharp instructions. The man leaning against the backhoe was holding a chainsaw. Monday shot an anxious look toward the big live oak.

Two men came hurrying up to join the group. One was young and worried-looking, with brown hair that kept falling forward over his eyes. The other was older and in a police uniform, with large crescents of sweat under his arms, buttons straining across his stomach.

"You Mr. Gillam?" the older man asked politely.

Gillam's eyes became slits. "I am."

The younger man burst in. "I'm Robert Gray of the Historic Preservation League, and we've obtained an injunction—"

"I'll handle this, boy," the officer said. He took a paper from his breast pocket. "This here's a paper authorizing me to stop you from disturbing this site."

"We've got us a permit," Randy Gillam said. Eyes like two gray stones in his head, Monday thought.

"Yes, sir, we know that," the officer said.

"And the operation's being carried out with suitable reverence," the older Gillam said. He shot a look at the man by the backhoe, who picked that moment to expel a stream of tobacco juice into the grass.

"Yes, sir, only thing is, you go to yankin' the dead around, it gets to be a real touchy bidness," the officer said. "Judge went and ordered a hearing, so you'll have to explain it to him. My hands are tied." He shot a resentful look at the young man as if to make clear whose side he was on.

"Lemme see that paper," Randy said, grabbing it. Monday watched as he read it and flung it back at the officer.

"You takin' this lyin' down, Daddy?" Randy asked. His hands were on his hips, his lip curled.

"No, I ain't," Gillam said. "I got friends in the county—all the way up to the state capital, in fact. I'll get it straightened out. Bubba, you leave that backhoe right where it is, we'll be needin' it. All right, boys, you can knock off for now." He turned to the young man with the unruly hair. "And I don't want to see you around here again, you got that? You and your damned historic preservation nuts."

The young man seemed not at all put off, Monday thought.

"You might see me again," he said calmly.

Indeed, Monday saw him several times after that, so it was clear he was keeping an eye on the place. He usually parked down the road, beyond the gatehouse, and walked in on foot. Sometimes, if Monday was on her porch, he nodded politely and spoke. Once he stopped and said he had seen her at the cemetery. Did she have kin buried there? Monday said she did, and he shook his head, said it was a bad business and asked what her name was.

Then one day, with the hot torpid weather still holding, Ellie Gillam came to call. Monday drew in her breath on a little sharp hiss when she saw her, but then bridged the moment quickly by fetching mint tea and taking it to the front porch.

"There now," she said, trying not to look at the bruises on the girl's upper arms, the red welt on one cheekbone. "You just set there and face over that way—that's where the sea breeze comes in right about now."

"This is a real nice porch," Ellie said politely. Confederate jessamine overhung part of it, providing shade. A month ago, when it was in flower, the fragrance had been enough to turn your head.

"Solomon added the porch," Monday explained. "Anson built the house, but then Solomon tacked on another room in the back and this porch."

"They made it real nice for you," Ellie said with approval.

"They did," Monday agreed. "They done their best, I do believe."

Someone came trudging along the hot road—the young man, Robert Gray. He looked toward them and waved, and his step faltered briefly as he saw Ellie rocking gently and facing into the sea breeze.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Deveau," he said, and Monday nodded and waved back at him. His eyes stayed on Ellie for a time before he went on walking.

"Everything all right with you?" Monday asked the girl when he was gone.

"Oh yes." She rocked for a moment, but then slowed to a halt and turned to Monday. "I mean, it's about as right as it ever is. I guess you noticed—" She touched her cheekbone with her fingertips. "What I did, see, I talked to Randy. I said when the baby's born I didn't want to live shut up in that condo any more. I said I wanted to live in a house—just a little house somewhere, anywhere would be all right, so that the baby could play on the grass and have a kitten, things like that." She paused. "A house like this would be fine," she said, looking around at the sagging boards of the porch.

"He didn't take to that?" Monday asked.

"No." The girl didn't say any more, or need to. But Monday could see resolution in her thoughts. She'd made up her mind to run off once she'd had the baby. Monday worried about that. It was the kind of thing that brought on powerful trouble. And where could she run to? She was a child herself.

There was another week of heat and lassitude. Several times Monday walked to the cemetery. It was in the same condition, the wrought-iron fence flung about on the ground. The backhoe remained where it was, poised to rumble in and dismantle the graves. Monday looked anxiously at the ancient tree. Its days too were numbered, if Gillam won the battle with the worried young man.

A few days later clouds moved in at last, thunderheads that rolled up blackly and darkened the day to a menacing twilight. Sounds became muted and muffled, but one came through clearly. A chain saw biting into venerable wood. Monday put on her hat,

grabbed Solomon's old raincoat, and hurried off to confirm what she suspected.

She didn't bother to stop at the gatehouse for a card, for the burying ground lay open now. She scuttled up the road and stopped short at the sight of the man with the hard hat and chain saw. The blade was whirring into the old oak near the two graves. Monday could feel the pain of it. She pressed her fingers against her mouth. Standing nearby was Randy Gillam and next to him Robert Gray, his unruly hair flying in the breeze, his face tight with anger.

"This hasn't been settled yet!" he was shouting at Randy.

"My daddy'll have it settled by Monday, don't you worry," Randy said, his lip curling. "We're just gettin' this old tree out of our way so's we can go ahead. That damned paper of yours don't say anything about a tree."

"You have no right!" Robert Gray yelled, and Monday, who knew well enough that that argument didn't always pull its weight, shook her head sadly. Then lightning forked through the sky and thunder came crashing down on them, and the three men stood as if frozen.

"Better get on back, Bubba," Randy said. "We can finish this later. Shouldn't be under that thing in a storm."

They both moved off quickly, but Monday darted forward, putting her hand on the scar. Not too deep yet, not so deep it couldn't recover, but Lord, Lord, who was to save it?

"Mrs. Deveaux, you'd better hurry home, too," Robert Gray said. "Here, I'll come along, see you safely back."

Monday made no protest, since it was something he seemed to want to do, but let herself be led along the road to her own house. By then the rain had started to come down, sheeting against the dark green of the magnolias, bending the crape myrtles.

"Step on my porch a minute," Monday said. "You'll catch your death."

He scooted up on the porch with her, and together they stood and watched the storm, listening to its roar.

"Very discouraging," Robert Gray said. "You try and try, but it always seems as if they've got more of everything."

Monday knew what he meant—more money, more important connections.

"Sometimes it seems so," she agreed. She sat down in one of the rocking chairs, and presently he slid into the other. She waited for him to ask the thing that she knew was on his mind.

"The other day when I walked by here, I saw you sitting with a girl—a young woman," he said.

"Her name's Ellie," Monday said.

He nodded, and didn't ask anything else. Monday knew what the unasked questions were, but she let him hang onto them. When the rain let up a little, he said he'd better make a run for it. His car was just down the road.

Toward night, the rain circled around and hit again. Monday, fixing herself some supper, heard the wind rise, heard the rain start to lash down in fresh torrents. She cast an anxious eye out back at her garden. Things were going to get squashed, no doubt about it. But what she'd do, tomorrow if it cleared off she'd go out and stake up the tomatoes. Everything else she guessed would recover by itself. She thought about Anson and Solomon in the graveyard. It wouldn't bother them any; they liked a good rain this time of year.

Monday ate her supper, washed her dish and teacup, and went to sit in her chair and turn on the small television set. She liked to watch the evening news, see what mischief and devilment the rest of the world was up to. But halfway through the broadcast, the screen turned grainy and the sound disappeared. Monday turned the thing off with an impatient gesture.

She sat quietly then, listening to the storm, the thunder rolling in, the water flinging itself against the little house. She'd seen storms aplenty. They didn't worry her any.

At ten o'clock she got up to get ready for bed, and it was then that the pounding came at the door—a desperate sound on a night like this, Monday thought. She went and opened it.

The girl tumbled into the house, almost into her arms. Monday made the door fast, then helped her to a chair. She was dressed the way Monday always saw her, in a thin cotton dress, and she was soaked through. Monday hurried for a towel to dry her face and then a blanket to throw around her, frowning anxiously as she did so, for there was danger in something like this, when a baby was coming.

"Child, child," she murmured, and saw a thin trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth.

"I was afraid," Ellie moaned, rocking back and forth as Monday wrapped the blanket around her. "I was so scared, Miz Deveaux. I didn't know where to go."

"He hit you again?"

Ellie nodded. "I tried to get away, and finally I did, but he's after me. He's right behind me."

Monday went to look out the front window. "Ain't anybody out there," she said. "Might be he give up and went back." She doubted that this was so, but she wanted to offer the girl some comfort. And he might not think to look for her here, not right off.

Then the girl moaned and bent forward as though with a sudden spasm of pain, and Monday thought, oh Lord, Lord, lookit what I've been handed. She straightened Ellie up gently and said, "You just sit there till I get the bed ready. And don't you worry, not for a minute. You ain't got enough fingers to count off how many babies I delivered."

She hurried into the small back bedroom, pulled off the bear-paw quilt and folded it carefully, yanked the sheet back, and spread newspapers over her new mattress that she'd bought with five years of Green Stamps. Then she put on a clean sheet. She led the girl to the bed, helping her out of the soaking dress and into one of Solomon's old nightshirts.

"There now," she said, as if the thing were all concluded instead of just starting. "Now we're ready."

Inside, she felt a nervous quaking. Should she try to find a doctor? Where would she find one? She had no telephone. That young man, Robert Gray, he was someone she could ask for help, but he'd never be around, a night like this. What if that husband showed up here with his cold gray eyes and booming voice?

Ellie let out a little cry, and Monday went and sat by the bed with her, stroking her forehead. When she was quiet again, Monday started to assemble her scissors and soft twine, her towels and basins. She knew what to do, knew it as well as anybody on this island. She sat in the small rocker Anson had made for her and rocked gently back and forth.

The banging on the door didn't come till daylight. Monday's heart went plummeting, but she wasn't afraid. Not for herself, she wasn't. The girl was another kind of worry.

Only it wasn't Randy Gillam with his furious narrow pig-eyes. It was Robert Gray. Monday went so limp with relief she came close to hugging him. The storm had pretty much blown itself out, and the air had cooled some. There were branches in the roadway, she could see. She didn't even dare look at her garden.

"Mr. Gray—Robert—" It wasn't any time to be mealymouthed polite, she thought. "Come on in and tell me what's happened."

He gave her an odd questioning look. "How do you know anything happened?"

Monday stared back at him. How did she know? Something had told her—no, not something—*they'd* told her. Anson and Solomon. Sometime in the night she'd heard them, clear as clear. As she and the young man stood there beside the still-open door, a black and white police car went tearing along the road toward the gatehouse entrance. A medical emergency van followed it. Monday looked at Robert Gray. He was wearing a long waterproof coat but no hat. His flyaway hair was plastered down.

"I just had a feeling," she said in a low voice.

"It's Randy Gillam," Robert said. "He's dead."

Monday nodded slowly and closed the front door. She walked over to her small stove and put on a kettle of water.

"Cup of tea might do us good," she said.

He was looking at her curiously. "A limb broke off that big oak tree in the corner of the burying ground," he said. "In the storm last night. Caught him square on the head, fractured his skull. I can't think what he was doing out like that."

Monday, who knew what he was doing, stayed silent.

"I was here early, to see what the storm damage was," he said.

"That's how I came to find him."

She nodded. Then she said, "They'll be looking for his wife. The police and them."

"Well, I suppose."

"Maybe you could tell 'em. She's here with me."

Now his look turned to genuine astonishment. "*His wife?*"

"You remember her—that girl Ellie, was sitting on the porch with me that day?"

His face flushed suddenly. "What's she doing here?"

Monday sighed. "Oh, it's a long story, full of woes and windings. Take a good while to tell it. But what it comes down to is, she's here. And so's her baby."

"Baby!" His eyes widened. Monday tried to ease him a little, he looked so distressed.

"Lord, it wasn't a speck of trouble. Nothing to take on about. A little girl, she had." Monday poured boiling water over the tea in the pot and put the lid on. "There, while that's making, you can just peek in at her."

She led the way, opened the door a crack, and then let him look over her shoulder.

Early morning light was coming into the room. Ellie lay in the bed, one hand flung out on the pillow, the other cradling a small wrapped bundle. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Monday pulled the door closed. She glanced at Robert Gray's face and saw that it held a wistful sadness.

"This news is going to be hard on her," he said.

"I believe she'll be all right," Monday said. She wouldn't speak ill of the dead. And besides, the look on his face told her something she hadn't quite worked out yet, but she thought maybe Ellie wouldn't be altogether alone. She hoped it might turn out that the burying ground wouldn't be touched any more, either.

The newspaper called it a "tragic accident," but of course Monday knew better. She kept the knowledge to herself, because it didn't do to speak aloud of murder, but she knew well enough who'd killed him. What amazed her mostly was that she'd thought Anson and Solomon never listened to her troubles, and here they'd taken in the whole thing, every word, when she'd explained it to them. She'd always wanted them to learn to get along together. Now it almost seemed as if they were overdoing it a little.

User Unfriendly

by Ruth A. Gerik



She had been found wandering the streets, babbling something about a pencil and someone named Kim. Since I had been on duty when she was brought in, I was assigned her case. For three days she had remained under

sedation and under restraint. Today was the first day she had been rational enough to make any sense at all.

There were no physical injuries, but she was definitely not relating to the world around her. She still looked tense but

appeared much calmer than at our first meeting. I poured her a glass of water from the carafe that Peggy, my secretary, keeps filled by my desk and offered her a cigarette, which she accepted. I myself feel somewhat smug about the fact that I have quit, but I keep a pack of ultra-lows for patients. Watching her hands as she took the cigarette and then fumbled with my desk lighter, I noticed that they were not the hands of someone accustomed to physical labor. The skin was smooth and white. But the nails had been chewed far down into the quick—to the point where they must have bled. I found myself thinking how much those cruelly bitten fingertips clashed with those otherwise graceful hands. She took a long draw from the cigarette as if gaining sustenance from the smoke.

"It seemed like such a good idea at the time," she began, "but I guess I should have known that it was too good to be true. But the program sounded so good, and the price was so low (I later found out why!) that I just couldn't resist. You're looking at me strangely, doctor. That's right. You have no idea what I'm talking about. Do you? I guess I'd better start at the beginning." With that, my patient settled back in her

chair, inhaled smoke deeply, and began.

"My name is Rachel Browning, and I'm an author. Not a well known one, but I have managed to sell a few articles and short stories to magazines. You might have read some of them." Here she rattled off the names of a number of pulp magazines with which I was not familiar. She seemed disappointed to learn that, to this reader at least, she still remained an unknown. "My last short story had been purchased for a larger than usual amount of money, and to treat myself, I decided to invest in a computer. That's the way I looked at it, too—as an investment. I'd been working with an old manual typewriter, and it was just too hard to write that way. Since I've been supporting myself—not well, but adequately—for a while now with my writing, I figured I could produce more if I had better tools to work with." Rachel stubbed out her cigarette and took a sip of water before continuing.

"Even though I hadn't owned one before, I wasn't unfamiliar with computers. I had taken a class and used a friend's; I guess you'd call me an educated consumer. And I shopped around. The computer I decided on wasn't top of the line, but it suited my purposes. It had a

keyboard and monitor, and with the inexpensive dot matrix printer I added, the system itself was more than adequate for my needs. It had more memory than I actually needed, but it was on sale. Come to think of it, if it had had less memory, Kim probably wouldn't have been able to take up residence in my computer and make my life a living hell."

My concentration, which had wandered, snapped back to my patient's story. Finally I would find out about the mysterious Kim.

"I suppose that when you make any large purchase your name automatically finds its way onto mailing lists of all companies having even the remotest connection with your purchase," continued Rachel. "I know that in my case I started receiving computer junk mail almost immediately. I'm not talking about the computer generated kind—the kind where Ed McMahon is telling you that you could be throwing away your chance to win a million dollars if you don't respond immediately. I'm talking about advertisements for computer magazines, computer gadgets, computer software, and even other computers. I had just bought my first computer. It was barely out of its box, and I was receiving information

about buying another one. May I have another cigarette?" I gave her the package. She shook out one of the last two cigarettes, lit it, and resumed her narrative.

"I normally threw out the advertisements for new computers, although at first I would check to see if my computer was as good a deal as I thought it was . . . and it was." Here Rachel gave a somewhat self-satisfied smile and looked at me as if seeking my approval. For lack of a better response, I nodded. "I usually kept the software advertisements and read them. Although I had purchased a word processing program for my system, it was an inexpensive, basic program. I felt that I needed a program that would do more—you know, check spelling and things like that." I suppose I looked as if I understood because she continued.

"One day I got an advertisement for a piece of software called K.I.M. The letters stand for 'Kritic in Memory.' K.I.M. was a memory resident program that could catch and correct errors in style as well as spelling mistakes. It would find grammar mistakes and syntax mistakes and fix them. The advertisement listed these features, which were what I wanted. The ad also said that

K.I.M. could do much more and was able to interact with any word processing program. But the listed features were all I needed. And the price! Style checkers can sell for a couple of hundred dollars, but K.I.M. was only nine dollars and ninety-five cents. There was a money back guarantee and a toll free number to order. I figured I couldn't lose. Could I have another glass of water, please?" I buzzed Peggy, and while waiting for the water, Rachel lit the final cigarette in the pack. Rachel thanked Peggy for the water when it arrived but otherwise remained silent until Peggy had left the room.

"The package arrived two days later. Just one disk with installation instructions. I could hardly contain my excitement. If this actually worked, it could make rewrites and corrections so much easier. I booted up my computer." Noticing my questioning look, she corrected herself. "I turned the computer on. According to the instructions, all I had to do was insert the disk in a drive and press any key, and K.I.M. would basically install itself. And it did. After about three minutes of whirring and grinding, a message appeared on the screen. The message read, 'Hi. I am KIM. I will ensure that

your writing improves or you may return me for a full refund. Please type your name. When you have finished, press "Enter."' I did that, and the next thing I know, my computer is talking to me. No, don't look at me like that. I did not imagine it. My computer, or rather KIM, actually spoke."

"What did KIM say?" I asked, using the calmest, most professional tone of voice I possess. Many patients come to talk to me, and I'm always leery of those who claim to hear voices. Whether the voices emanate from inside their heads or from the washing machine, I tend to be more careful when patients start talking that way.

"It's funny, but I was so surprised that I can't remember exactly what she said. I do remember the voice was female. I remember dropping the cup of coffee I was drinking. I remember being thankful that the coffee had spilled all over my shirt and not on the computer. I was simply astounded that my computer had a voice. It wasn't an option I had purchased, but it seemed that maybe I had gotten more than I bargained for." Rachel took a long draw from that last cigarette before grinding it out. "Boy, did I ever get more than I bargained for!" She laughed, long and loud, a laugh not happy, but verging on hys-

teria. Just as I considered ringing for a nurse, she quieted.

"I guess because I hadn't responded the first time, KIM spoke again. 'Hello, Rachel,' she said. 'You must type your responses. Although I can speak, I can't hear.' I tentatively typed, 'Hello, Kim,' not believing for a minute that I was actually having a conversation with a machine. This was apparently the response that KIM wanted. 'Rachel, I am here to assist you with your writing. You will find that I have features of which you may not be aware. I will not only check your spelling and your grammar, but I will also enable you to become a much more disciplined writer than you ever thought possible. Get a good night's sleep tonight because we will start bright and early tomorrow morning.' I thought, at the time, that that sounded good. I had never been a very disciplined writer. Editors had told me that for years. If KIM could help me tighten my prose, she would be well worth her nine ninety-five purchase price. Little did I know what KIM meant by discipline. Do you, by any chance, have another cigarette? Any kind will do." She had finished the last of my cigarettes, and I had to buzz Peggy again to see what she could round up.

"Since I was tired anyway, I turned off the computer and went to bed. I never set my clock radio unless I have an appointment, and I expected to get up the next morning whenever I happened to wake up—around nine or ten. Didn't work that way. At six o'clock KIM's voice came from my radio. 'It's time to get up; get breakfast, and get started with your writing.' I have no idea how she did it, but KIM had managed to enter the circuitry of my radio and give her own personal wakeup call. And she had no snooze alarm. She kept on and kept on until I got out of bed just to shut her up."

Peggy entered with an unopened package of lights. I waited while Rachel opened the package and withdrew a cigarette. While she was lighting it, I spoke, again using my calm professional's voice although I was not feeling quite as calm as before. "Sometimes the mind plays tricks on us. Perhaps you had set the clock the night before, and only thought you were listening to KIM when, in actuality, it was the radio."

She took a long, deep drag on the cigarette and answered, "I thought that at first. After my shower, I decided that it could only have been my imagination, but when I went into the kitchen, the coffee was already

made. I always set it up the night before, but my coffeepot doesn't have a timer so I have to wait until morning to turn it on. Even this I was willing to give a logical explanation to. I must have stumbled into the kitchen and turned it on before my shower. But then I went into my workroom and KIM was waiting for me. I know I had turned the computer off the night before, but it was on, and as I walked in the door, KIM said, 'You're really going to have to do much better than this. It should take you no longer than thirty minutes in the morning from the time you wake until the time you sit at your keyboard.' At that point I realized that my writing was not the only thing KIM intended to discipline.

"For three months I knuckled under. I think I honestly believed that this was good for me. And, I must admit, I did turn out some of my best work. But I felt it was KIM's work. She corrected my spelling, caught my typos, and criticized my writing. If she didn't like the turn a story was taking, the keyboard would lock up and I would hear, 'Tripe,' or 'Overused,' or 'Cliche,' in that voice I grew to detest. I wrote some very tight, disciplined articles that were

very well received, but I felt like a hack. KIM allowed no imagination to enter my work—no deviation from letter perfection. If she didn't approve of a piece, it didn't—no, couldn't—get written. Finally I had had enough. I decided that I would have to write without KIM and without my computer, since it was possessed by KIM. She had taken over my house and all my appliances, and I had to leave. I guess when they found me I had been wandering for a while. I do know that I was looking for a pencil and some paper. There's no way KIM can take over a pencil. Is there?" She lit another cigarette from the butt of the one she had smoked to the filter. "Is there?" she repeated.

I assumed my best psychologist posture and tried to think of an answer for her. I was thinking in terms of commitment—or at least a long, long rest. Then my intercom buzzed. "Dr. Fisher, this is KIM. Would you please send Rachel home. We have a lot of work to do. Rachel, please don't waste time. It took me a long time to search through all those computer files to find you."

Rachel blanched. I reached for a cigarette.

FICTION

Phone Call from the Dead

by Kenneth Gavrell

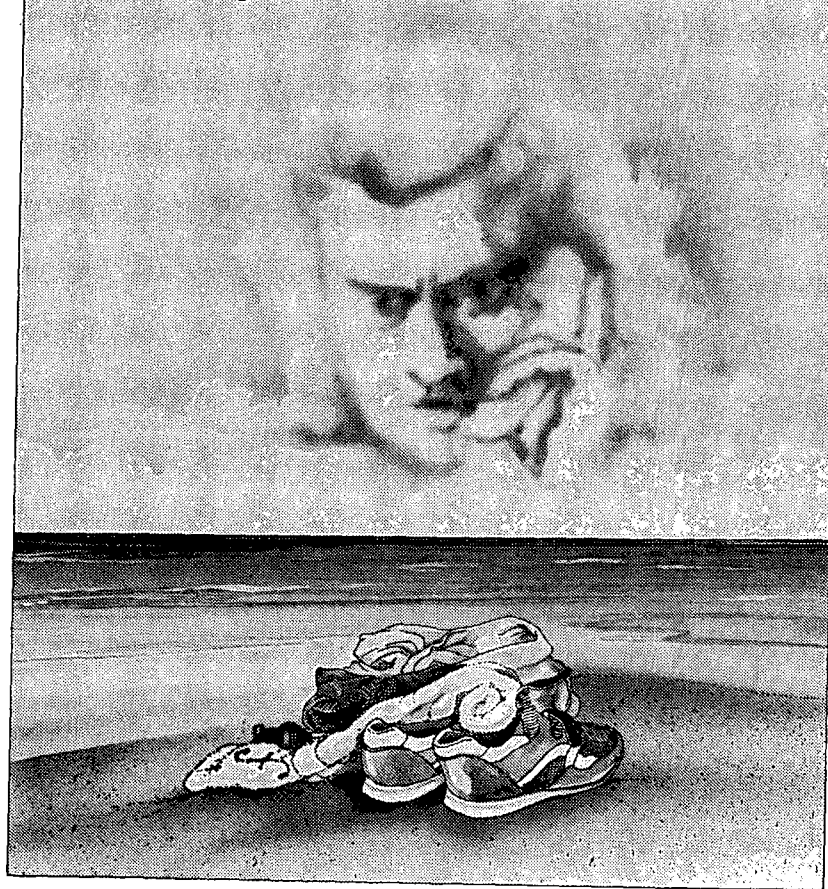


Illustration by Jim Odbert

The sun was shining everywhere except in my living room. Raquel and I had had a bad fight, and I was finding more skies of grey than any Russian play. Our relationship had lasted over five years, which was a record for me, and I really didn't want to see it rained out. But things had not been running smoothly between us for some time.

The fact that a friend of mine had died the previous day had not helped my internal weather any. He was a cop in the narcotics division named Frank Pacheco who had helped me on a couple of cases. We had also been poker and beer-drinking buddies.

Frank had drowned off the Condado beach. It's ironic that our tourist hotel strip should line one of the most dangerous beaches in Puerto Rico, but it does. Strong currents and nasty rocks, and not a lifeguard anywhere to be seen. Frank lived in the area and had taken a swim ritually every evening for exercise. He was a good swimmer and should have known better than to get himself drowned, but there it was.

His body had not yet turned up, perhaps it never would turn up, but they'd found his shorts and shirt (in the pockets of his shorts were his Blue Cross card and a five dollar bill), his Casio

watch in his sneakers, and his towel with the initial F monogrammed on it, a present from his girlfriend Lourdes.

I'd first learned about his death from the morning newspaper. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was still trying to work up my courage to call Lourdes and express my condolences.

At five I was stoking my guts with generous doses of *ron Palo Viejo* when the phone rang. I picked it up hesitantly.

"Bannon residence," I said with ingenious irony.

"Carlos, this is Frank Pacheco."

"Whoever you are, the joke is not funny."

"Jesus, Carlos, it *is* me. I swear."

The voice sounded close, but not quite right.

"You should have worked on the voice more, you sadistic son of a bitch."

"I've got a cold, Carlos. Look, you've *got* to believe me. I have to see you."

"Fine. Come on over."

"I faked my death—left the health insurance card and other things on purpose. I had to disappear."

It was beginning to sound like it might be real. It gave me an eerie sensation.

"Why?" I asked, still unwilling to be any sadist's patsy.

"If I hadn't, some people I know were going to *make* me disappear, permanently."

"At least there's some logic to that."

"The barber has long shears, Carlos."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll explain everything, but not now. I have to get out of here—it's too dangerous."

"Out of where?"

"Listen, there's a hotel on the outskirts of Caguas called the Hacienda Carmesí. Do you know it?"

He sneezed very convincingly.

"No."

"It's just off the old Caguas road north of town."

"I can find it," I said noncommittally.

"Be there at eight tonight. Come alone. Ask for Juan Huida at the desk."

"Look, I'm not going on any wild goose chase on the strength of a crazy phone call."

"You have to come. I have to tell somebody. You're about the only person that I can trust."

"Tell me on the phone."

"No, I can't." He sneezed again. "Eight o'clock tonight, Carlos. I'm counting on you. Don't let me down."

He suddenly hung up. I sank into the chair beside the phone. It *could* have been Frank. The

voice was close. They hadn't found a body. But it didn't make sense. Why call me? Why a hotel in Caguas? It was all too damned Agatha Christie by half.

I got up and poured another snort of Palo Viejo; I noticed that my hands were trembling slightly.

I was crazy. I had to be crazy to be going on this fool's errand. The .357 Magnum under my armpit was already making me sweat as I threw on a light sport jacket. My watch read seven fifteen. I'd been home since noon, and Raquel hadn't called. Of course, neither had I.

I pulled my Nissan out of the lot and pointed it toward the *autopista*. Since it was Sunday night, there wasn't much traffic going south; everybody was coming into San Juan.

Just past the Caguas toll-booths, I pulled off the *autopista* into the old road. I was about a mile north of town. I swung into the first gas station I saw, splurged on five dollars' worth of gas, and asked the way to the Hacienda Carmesí.

The pump attendant, a young guy with a tattoo of the Puerto Rican flag on his upper arm, eyed me skeptically. "You staying there?"

"No. I'm picking up a friend."

"I thought that old place only serviced couples these days."

I got the message. "He's out of funds," I said.

The attendant stopped the electronic gauge exactly on five dollars and slammed the nozzle into its holder. I passed him a ten. "It was once a pretty good hotel," he said, "until they built the *autopista* bypassing town. A lot of places on the old road started suffering after that."

"Including you?" I asked.

"No. We're close enough in to get the local business." He carefully peeled off five dollar bills and handed them to me. "Hotels don't live off local business."

"So where is it?" I repeated patiently.

"Just go down here to the second light and make a left. It's about two blocks in on the right. A big old place. Used to be red, but now it's more like a brown. I don't suppose they can afford to paint it."

I thanked him and followed his directions into a lonely, rundown street that drifted uphill. The hotel was flanked by two very old houses; across the street from it sat some kind of factory. The street was empty and dark, two of the four nearby streetlights broken.

The Hacienda Carmesí was a rambling, rotting two story wooden structure with a long

narrow porch and shutters on the windows. The gas station attendant had been right about the color. There were a few windows lit on the ground floor, but nowhere else. A faded wooden sign above the porch confirmed that I'd found the right place.

I parked next to an impressive pothole and walked up the unkept gravel to the front door. It was open, and I walked into a yellow-lit hall-like area with a wooden desk on the left, stairs facing me, and two sagging armchairs on the right. There was nobody at the desk, but I found a six inch dinner bell and played a polka on it.

No response.

I played it again.

An old man in a soiled *guayabera* and pants that hung off him appeared at a doorway on the right. He tried a tired, uncertain smile as he approached me. He looked like life had kicked him around sufficiently.

"Buenas noches," he said.

"Buenas noches," I returned. "Estoy aquí para visitar a un amigo—Juan Huida. Can you tell me his room?"

His face fell with disappointment. "Dos cero uno," he said—201. "It's upstairs on the left. At the end of the hall."

"Muchas gracias."

He nodded and watched as I ascended the ancient stairs.

The place smelled of cooking. The lights in the hallway were of the lowest possible wattage. What was on the floorboards had once been a carpet. I found the door of 201 at the end of the long hall. It was at the building's rear, facing, I imagined, a weed-grown back yard full of old bedsprings and starved chickens. I pulled out my Magnum and held it inside my right jacket pocket. Not all of it fit. Since I'm a curious idiot, I knocked at the door.

All I heard was the echo of my own knocking.

I banged harder, making the paneled door shake.

The place was as quiet as a morgue and was making me nervous.

The door had a huge keyhole which probably hadn't seen any exercise in years. Even if it had, a child of ten could pick his way in. I bent down and peered through the keyhole; all I saw was black.

So I tried the big brass door-knob. The door creaked open, throwing a fan of yellow light across the room. I felt for a wall switch, found one, and flicked on the sickly ceiling light.

I had been too skeptical. It was Frank Pacheco, all right. There he was lying on the floor next to the bed with a bright red stain centering on the front of his white shirt.

I started toward the body of my friend, but didn't quite make it before the back of my head exploded like a Fourth of July rocket and dissolved in darkness.

I heard a voice saying, "Balls, balls, balls, balls, balls." It took me a long time to realize that it was my voice. When I realized it, I was surprised at my using so mild an expletive.

I had the worst headache in the history of the world. The back of my head was sticky to the touch: that would be my precious blood. He'd probably hit me with the butt of a gun.

Even the dim light of the hotel room seemed bright to my painfully focusing eyes. I was focusing them on the place near the bed where I remembered seeing Frank Pacheco's body. It was still there. I dragged myself to my feet and stumbled over to confirm my earlier estimate of his condition. He looked as if he had been dead for a while.

Which made me think to check the time. I squinted at my watch: it looked like eight thirty. That meant I'd been out cold for half an hour.

There were three slug holes in Frank's shirt front. They were grouped about where his

heart would be. The blood had already begun to dry.

Clutching the back of my head, I made my way out of the room and down the stairs to the hall desk. There was no one around, of course. I waved the dinner bell robustly, wincing at each meeting of metal. It sounded like the gongs of Notre Dame to me.

Finally my Quasimodo appeared. He was clenching a half-empty bottle of Budweiser.

"Did someone go up to my friend's room before me?" I asked him.

"*No vi a nadie.*" I didn't see anybody.

"I don't suppose you saw anybody come down either."

He shook his head, his wrinkled eyes clearly expressing their curiosity about what was going on.

"Tell me, do you ever spend any time at this desk?" I asked.

He shrugged his thin shoulders. "*No tenemos muchos clientes.*" We don't get many people.

"If you did, they wouldn't be able to find you," I said angrily.

"Did you hurt your head?" he asked.

"Yes! Where's your telephone?"

He pointed to a shallow counter along the wall behind the desk.

I followed my nose around the desk and dialed the number of the homicide division at the main headquarters in Hato Rey. I asked to speak to either Captain Burgos or Lieutenant Romero, the two detectives I knew personally there. They informed me that *Captain* Romero was in, so I told *Captain* Romero about the body waiting for him upstairs.

It was nearly an hour before Romero and his homicide team arrived. While they dusted for prints and played with the cameras, tapes, and plastic bags, he grilled me.

"So you came down here even though you thought the phone call was a phony."

"I had to check it out. The voice sounded close enough, and he said he was in trouble."

"Someone was trying to make him 'disappear permanently.'"

"That's what he said. Except the someone was plural."

"So, was he planning to hide out in this fleabag indefinitely?"

"I have no idea."

Romero turned to the old man, who was watching us intently. I couldn't decide if he was more upset about having a murder in his hotel or pleased at having this interesting break in the stagnation of his

day-to-day existence. "*Cuándo llegó el muerto a su hotel?*" Romero fired at him. When did the murdered man arrive at your hotel?

"About half an hour before *he* did"—he pointed at me.

"That makes it about seven thirty," I said.

"So he didn't call you from here," Romero said. "Did he come alone?" he asked the old man.

"*Sí, sí. Solo.*"

"Did he come in a car?"

"*No, Señor Policía.* In a taxi."

"I can check on the cab," Romero muttered. He addressed the old man again: "Does that door have a key?"

"*No, señor.* Lost years ago. But we respect people's privacy here."

Romero turned back to me. "Somebody must have followed him here from wherever he took the taxi. It was almost too easy."

One of the homicide team presented him with two slugs that had exited through Frank's back. They looked like .38's to me. Romero peered at them while he lit a Winston off his ancient Zippo.

"The *viejo* didn't hear any shots," he said. "That probably means a silencer."

"Professional," I offered. I took out a cigarette of my own. "Who do you think killed him?"

"Pacheco's been working in the narcotics division for twelve years. By now he should have made enough enemies to last him several lifetimes."

"Do you think you'll solve it?"

"No," Romero said. "No. I don't think I'll solve it. We don't solve most of them. And in this one, about the only thing we've got to work on is the slugs. I don't expect they'll be much help."

"I see you've made captain," I changed the subject.

"After only twenty-eight years."

"Better late than never," I clichéd brightly.

He just looked at me.

"It'll help the retirement pay," I said.

"I'm counting the days," Romero said. "A little over a year and I'll be out of this crud." His cynical grey eyes became almost reminiscent. "You know, I've seen just about every kind of murder there is, Bannan. I've seen heads blown off, bodies with forty stab wounds, bodies after a bombing, bodies sadistically mutilated, bodies bloated by drowning, bodies after two weeks of fermentation, dry skeletons in ditches and vacant lots. I've seen it all in twenty-eight years. And you know what I believe?"

I shook my head uncomfortably.

"I believe in absolutely nothing. Nothing except that this goose egg world is one stinking place and most of the people in it stink, too."

"Jesus," I said. "Retiring to your farm in Maunabo won't help you, Moisés. There won't be enough loneliness out there to cure what ails you."

He tossed his cigarette to the floor and ground it into extinction. "All I got from this — job is grey hair, black lungs, a stomach that does an imitation of a boa constrictor every time I put something in it, and a nagging wife who hates everything connected with my work."

"You've done some good," I said mollifyingly.

"Good!" he spit out the word like a curse. "'Good' doesn't hack it any more, Bannon. I once read a book called *Heart of Darkness*. There was a guy in it who saw things pretty clearly. He said: 'Exterminate all the brutes.'"

As I followed the night road back to San Juan, I reflected on what I'd seen happen to Moisés Romero in the nine years I'd known him. He had certainly never been a pleasant man or very friendly to me, but his present corroding bitterness

was the kind that could put a man into an early grave. I felt sorry for the woman who had to live with him.

Which brought me back to thoughts of Raquel. I'd call her in the morning, see if I couldn't patch things up. I'd call her before I went to talk to Lourdes and to Frank Pacheco's mother. A friend of mine had been killed after telephoning me for help. I'd been slugged in the head. The cop in charge of the investigation wasn't very optimistic about finding the answers. I thought this merited some investigation on my own part, and I wasn't so busy these days that I couldn't give it the time. But I certainly wouldn't inform Captain Moisés Romero of my intentions.

The next morning my head was still swollen and throbbing. It would probably be wise to have it checked by a doctor, but I wasn't feeling wise today. I drove to my office in the Condado.

"Well, *you're* early," my part-time secretary Maria remarked as I strolled in a little after nine.

"I'm turning over a new leaf. Next week I give up sex."

"That'll be the day," she snickered around her gum.

"Is the coffee made?"

"It's been made for some time, but Raul drank half of it."

Raul was the young man who ran routine checks for me.

"Where is he?"

"At the Bureau of Vital Statistics."

I poured the coffee, dumped in some sugar, and stood a spoon up in the glutinous mass.

"You don't think you could make it a little weaker," I suggested.

"There's no law that says you can't make it yourself," Maria observed.

"Two cheers for women's liberation," I said. "Did I get any calls?"

"Nope. Nobody loves you."

That was truer than she thought. I carried the coffee into my inner office, pushed the door to, and dialed Raquel's office number.

"Athena Detective Agency," said a male voice.

"Is Raquel Nieves there?"

"Who's calling, please?"

"Carlos Bannon."

"She just stepped out. Can I take a message?"

"Yes, you can. Tell her to get on the goddamn phone."

"As I said, she's out," the cool male voice said. "But I'll inform her that you called."

"Thanks a bloody lot," I said, banging down the receiver.

I thought I heard something like tittering from the outer of-

fice as I leafed through the metro directory for Lourdes Canales' number.

There was no answer. I knew she worked at a travel agency on Avenida Piñero, but I'd thought that after Frank's "death" two days ago, she wouldn't be at work.

Unless she knew his drowning had been a sham.

In which case, she might not yet know that he had really died last night.

The hell with telephone calls; I'd drive over to her agency.

A row of four desks with clients' chairs in front. Four other dilapidated metal chairs for people to wait on. Travel posters on the walls and brochures in a large metal rack. Computers and telephones. That was about it. Lourdes was behind the first desk on the right as I walked into the tight little room.

She was busy with a client and didn't notice me. I studied her fine features, beautiful bronze skin, long black eyelashes (real, Frank had assured me). She was about thirty-five, but looked younger. She didn't look like a woman destroyed by the accidental death of her lover two days earlier.

Finally those long-lashed eyes caught mine. They seemed uncertain how to react. I sat

and waited for her to finish with the customer. When he'd finally left, I walked over.

"Hi, Lourdes."

"Hello, Carlos." No expression.

"Can we step outside for a few minutes?"

She looked uncertainly around the room. Only one other person was waiting.

"I guess so," she said, pushing back her swivel chair.

We went out into the morning glare, and I strolled her down the sidewalk towards Muñoz Rivera.

"I'm surprised to see you at work after Frank's death," I said.

"You don't have to pretend with me," Lourdes said. "He called you from my apartment yesterday afternoon."

"I presume you don't get along with his mother," I said.

"What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"If you did, she would have telephoned you by now."

"About what?"

"Frank *was* killed last night. At that hotel in Caguas. I got there too late."

It was brutal, but I had to get her reaction. I got it, all right. She released a strange guttural cry and almost fell to the sidewalk. I grabbed her and supported her into a coffee shop we were just passing. By the time

I'd got her into a booth, her pretty face was a map of tears and running mascara. She was blubbering like a baby.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Terribly sorry. He was my friend."

"Oh God," she said. "Oh God."

It was painful to look at her face. She didn't make any attempt to cover it or to dry her streaming eyes.

I passed her my handkerchief. I looked out the window at the traffic jam simmering in the sun. I lit a cigarette and offered it to her. She shook her head like a dog drying itself after a bath.

It must have been fifteen minutes before I could talk to her.

"I'm going to try to find out what happened," I said. "I'm a detective: it's the kind of thing I get paid for. I'll be able to give the investigation a lot more loving care than the police will."

She nodded, mute, defeated.

"But I've got to know what was going on. Why did Frank fake his death?"

"He—he was afraid. He said some people were planning to kill him. He was going to try to leave Puerto Rico. I was going to follow him after a time."

"Where was he going to go?"

"I don't know. I don't think he'd decided yet. Oh, Carlos."

The tears came again. I waited.

"You knew about the hotel in Caguas."

She nodded.

"He took a taxi from your place."

She nodded again.

"Did he think he was being followed?"

"He was very scared, very secretive."

"Why secretive with you?"

"He said he didn't want to get me involved."

"You have *no* idea who was trying to kill him and why?"

She shook her head no. I couldn't decide if she was telling me the truth or not. I thought she and Frank had been very close.

"I'm scared too, Carlos," she said softly.

"If you don't know anything, there's nothing to be scared about," I reasoned.

"I'm scared anyway. Oh God. Where is Frank's body?"

"They'll be doing an autopsy on it. By now it's at Forensic Medicine. They'll release it to his mother in a few days."

"I wish I could help you," Lourdes said. "Oh, how I wish I could help you."

But when I left her twenty minutes later, she had done very little in the way of helping me to solve the murder of her lover.

*

I'd got the phone number of Frank's mother from Lourdes Canales, and I called it from a public telephone outside a service station on Piñero. She answered herself, and I identified myself as a friend of her son, asking if I could drop by to talk to her. She sounded stunned, distant, as if the synapses in her brain were not quite carrying the messages. But she said she would be home if I wanted to come over. I asked her where home was, and she gave me an address in the Santa Rosa section of Bayamón.

It was about a thirty minute drive through the rotten mid-day traffic. I knew that Frank's father had been dead for several years, and I suspected that the old lady would be feeling very lonely right now, and that was why she'd so readily agreed to see me. Frank had been an only child.

Most of Santa Rosa is old urbanization, one story cinder block houses built twenty-five or thirty years ago and consequently inhabited by older, quieter types. The kids would have moved into their own places, the mortgages would be paid, and the crime would mostly be confined to car thefts and burglaries. It would be boring but civilized.

Frank's mother's house was just as I'd pictured it, though a little more rundown than I'd expected. Apparently her son had not been very helpful in keeping up the maintenance of the place. As with all houses in San Juan, the windows were barred with *rejas* and an iron gate protected the front door. Finding no doorbell, I rapped on the door with my car keys. It took her a long time to reply "*Quién es?*"

"*El amigo de Frank. Yo llamé.*" I telephoned.

The door opened six inches. It was chained on the inside. I tried to look as unthreatening as possible.

"My name is Carlos Bannon," I smiled.

Her black eyes, which had served her for at least sixty-five years, surveyed me keenly before she undid the chain and inserted a key into the padlock of the gate.

"*Entre,*" she said.

I entered the dark, hot living room, and she relocked the gate behind me but left the door open.

The furniture was cheap and shabby. The best thing there was a twenty-seven inch JVC television. There were garish pictures of St. Francis and the Sacred Heart on the walls. There was a floor ashtray in the form of a winged cherub.

Frank's mother was stout, with no perceptible neck, sun-blotched skin, and hair dyed a nondescript color between blue and blonde. She walked as if she had leg problems.

"*Siéntese, siéntese,*" she said, indicating the threadbare sofa.

I sat down, feeling stiff and uncomfortable, and she eased into a rocking chair across from me. She automatically began rocking herself, her plump slippered feet rising slightly at the end of each rock.

"So you are one of Frank's friends," she said, absolutely without expression. "Are you also with the police?"

"In a way," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Oh," she said. "Then you must be the one who found —Frank last night."

"I see that the police have already been here."

"Yes—early this morning. They telephoned me last night. His body is at the Medical Center. I am to see him sometime this afternoon. They are coming for me."

That had been quite a speech for her.

"Mrs. Pacheco, did you know that Frank was faking his accidental drowning two days ago?"

She regarded me expressionlessly as if the words weren't registering. "No," she said dis-

tantly. "Apparently he didn't trust me with the information. He was in some terrible trouble, the police tell me." She stared at the wall behind me for a moment. "I have lost him twice. As soon as I was beginning to realize the first shock, came the second."

I could understand why she seemed so strangely stunned and remote.

"Frank pretended to drown in hopes of escaping the men who were trying to kill him, Mrs. Pacheco. Do you have any idea who these men were?"

"The men who sell the drugs, I suppose. They run Puerto Rico now, you know." Then, with unexpected energy: "Are you investigating Frank's murder?"

"Only unofficially," I said. "He was a friend of mine, and I was the one who found his body. He had called me to meet him at that hotel—he wanted to tell me something. Unfortunately, I arrived too late."

"I'm afraid I know nothing more than you do," she said. "My son did not confide in me. He only came to visit occasionally. I didn't approve of his relationship with that girl."

"Lourdes Canales."

She bobbed her head vaguely. "I believe that people should get married."

I didn't. I'd already tried that route.

"I've already talked to Miss Canales. She has no idea why Frank was afraid."

"Or so she says," the old woman murmured without looking at me.

I ignored the implication and said, "Do you know of anyone Frank might have confided his troubles to, Mrs. Pacheco?"

"If not to his mistress . . ." she left the bitter sentence incomplete.

"What about a close friend at work?" I prodded.

"I only met one friend from his work—a nice young man named Marcos. I don't remember his family name."

"Also in the narcotics division."

She didn't respond. She was looking at the wall again.

"I'd better go," I said. "I know how you must feel."

"Feel?" she said. "I lost my son twice."

I got to my feet and ambled to the door. She had to get up to unlock the gate.

Then I recalled something from Frank's phone call: "Mrs. Pacheco, Frank mentioned a 'barber' on the telephone. Do you know who or what that could refer to?"

"A barber?" She looked very puzzled. "No."

She pushed open the gate feebly. "I believe in marriage. I told him how I felt."

I patted her plump hand, said goodbye, and went out from the heat of the house to the heat of the street. I didn't know which was worse.

I glanced back as I opened my car door. The old lady had already closed (and no doubt chained) her front door. She was locked up with her thoughts and her memories. My visit had scarcely been a bubble on that agitated stream.

I drove across town to the police *cuartel* in Hato Rey.

As I was walking up the stone steps of the fortress-like police building, I ran into Moisés Romero and another, burlier homicide detective on their way out.

"Coming to visit me?" Romero asked cutely.

"I was curious as to what was happening," I said. It was half the truth.

"Quite a bit, but no thousand points of light yet."

He reached for his pack of Winstons and tapped one down against his hard, bony hand. He set fire to it and blew the smoke in my face.

"Ballistics says the slugs are .38 cannellures fired through a silencer. They're going to check them against records. Forensic

Medicine won't get around to the autopsy till tomorrow sometime.

"The people living near the hotel didn't notice anybody come or go until we arrived, but we located the taxi driver who delivered Pacheco there. He responded to a phone call from an address in San Juan. The address turns out to be the building where Pacheco's girlfriend, Lourdes Canales, lives. We're going to talk to her now. I already talked to Pacheco's mother, but she was no help at all—seemed to be in a state of shock, which is understandable."

"Did your boys go through Frank's apartment?" I asked.

"We did."

"Find anything interesting?"

"Not a damned thing except a ten year collection of *Playboy* magazines. Well, I take that back: we found an address book, which may be useful."

"You've been a busy beaver," I complimented him.

"We usually are when a cop gets killed," Romero said shortly. He started down the steps, and I walked beside him.

"By the way, how's your head, Bannon?"

"Much better, thank you."

He chuckled evilly. At the bottom of the steps, I left him, pretending to return to my car. When he was out of sight, I went back to the building and

asked if I could speak to Marcos in the narcotics division.

The cop at the reception desk eyed me appraisingly. I didn't look seedy enough to be an informant.

"Marcos who?" he asked.

"I just know his first name."

"You got a badge or something?"

I showed him my P.I. license. "It's in connection with a case he's working on," I lied.

I expected him to call narcotics to see if they had a Marcos and if he'd ever heard of me, but instead of doing the logical thing, he just took down my name and directed me to the narcs section.

The policewoman who greeted me there said that I must be referring to Marcos Huerta. I said, yes, that was him. I got the impression she liked the cut of my jib as she puckered her pretty little forehead with the bad news that he'd just left. I asked if she had any idea when he'd be back. She said she thought he'd gone to lunch—would I like to wait? I said I wouldn't mind, and she graciously indicated a trio of sturdy looking wooden armchairs lining the wall across from her.

We tossed each other little love glances while I waited.

An hour later I was getting pretty damned restive—not to

say hungry—when she stopped one of two men coming through the door and told him I was waiting to see him.

He turned to me curiously, a tall wiry guy of about forty dressed in a tan lightweight suit, a cream shirt, and a maroon tie. He didn't hold out his hand, but said abruptly, "I'm Sergeant Huerta. Who are you?"

"My name's Carlos Bannon. I was a friend of Frank Pacheco."

"Bannon," he repeated, searching his memory for the name. "You're the P.I. who found Frank's body."

"That's right."

"He called you to meet him there at that hotel."

"Right again. The killer knocked me out from behind; he hadn't even had time to leave the room."

"Come into the office," he invited me.

He led the way to a partitioned section that contained three desks, all cheap and much abused. He pulled up a metal folding chair for me and sat on the edge of the desk himself.

"What's your theory, Sergeant Huerta?" I asked. I could be as abrupt as he could.

"I would guess it was drug related. We're not very popular out there. Half the under-

ground economy of this island runs on drugs."

"You don't sound like we're winning the war."

"*Mierda*," he said. "If it was up to me, I'd legalize the crap. Then we could control it and put the *tiradores* out of business."

An unusually liberal view for a cop, I reflected. "Do you know what Frank was working on—which dealer might have wanted him out of the way?" I asked.

"It could have been any one of several. We'll check them out. Eventually we'll get the son of a bitch."

"You mean Homicide will."

"Not necessarily," he said.

"Is one of these dealers nicknamed the Barber?" I asked.

That one caught him right between the eyes, though he tried to cover up his reaction.

"Not that I know of," he said slowly. "Why do you ask that?"

"When he called me, Frank said something about a barber. I couldn't understand it."

"It would be an odd nickname," Huerta said. "If I'd heard it, I think I would remember it."

I thought he was lying. The police don't like to share their secrets with riffraff like me.

"Look—" Huerta leaned forward confidentially "—I'll check on this, Bannon. We've got the

mechanisms here. But if I were you, I'd stay out of it. You're alone, and these bastards would as soon blow off your head as wink at you."

"I've seen some of their handiwork in *El Vocero*," I said.

"I'll let you know if I turn up anything," Huerta said. "Give me your card."

I passed him one. "I'd appreciate it."

He smiled, but it seemed to me a tense smile. I told him I could find my own way out, and we shook hands.

The narcotics division was full of people, noisy and busy looking. They never ran out of work in there.

I had lunch in a little family restaurant I liked farther down Avenida Roosevelt, then drove to Raquel's detective agency in Santurce. The chances were about five to one against her being in the office, but another phone call certainly wasn't going to do me any good.

I found her at her desk typing up a report. She looked at me without a word as I walked up, her blonde hair shining in the sunlight from a nearby window.

"Look, I think we should talk," I said.

She didn't reply.

"Talking doesn't hurt anything," I said.

"It doesn't help anything, either," Raquel said. "You should know that by now."

"Let's go out for a cup of coffee."

"I can't. I'm busy."

"We can't talk here." My gaze swept over the half dozen people in the office watching us.

"I don't feel like talking," Raquel said. "Maybe later I'll feel like talking."

"How much later?"

"I don't know."

"Jesus, Raquel . . ."

Her hazel eyes regarded me with as much emotion as those of a Galapagos tortoise.

"I'll call you," I said.

"Not tonight," she said.

"Tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I don't know how I'll feel tomorrow."

Suddenly I felt murderously exasperated. I turned without another word and stalked out past the impassive eyes of her curious co-workers.

I slammed the car into gear and headed toward my own office in the Condado.

What was most exasperating was that she was right, of course. Talking *didn't* help anything. More often it made things worse as you both inflicted wounds that you'd remember twenty years later.

And by now I knew that things would work out as they

had to, no matter what we wanted. Raquel was what her life had made her, and so was I. Conditioning, circumstances, accident determined how things turned out. I didn't believe for one second in free will. Nobody was in control.

But all this philosophy didn't lessen the ache when I thought of the possibility of losing her after five years together. That would leave a terrible hole in my existence.

I was almost at my office when the presence of the green car in my rear view mirror finally forced itself past thoughts of Raquel and into my conscious mind. Unconsciously it had, I think, been there for some time.

Hadn't I seen that car, a late model Chevy, parked outside the police *cuartel* in Hato Rey? Hadn't I noticed it run a stoplight behind me on the way to Raquel's office? And hadn't it been hanging there, about two cars back, since I'd left her office?

Or was I just being more paranoid than usual? There was one way to find out. Instead of continuing down Ashford, I swung into a side street on the south side of the Condado and headed for the big Pueblo supermarket. I pulled into their parking lot, and damned if the

green Chevy didn't pull in behind me at a discreet distance.

Parking in a slot close by the entrance, I walked in the glaring sunlight through the brown glass doors. I stood next to the wall just inside and watched the Chevy park farther away on the edge of the lot. Nobody got out. Five minutes later, whoever was in the car still hadn't gotten out.

I skirted the perimeter of the store until I located the padded swinging doors that led to the storage area, pushed through them, and threaded my way through a labyrinth of stacked skids to the unloading platform. A man in a business suit yelled at me to the effect of where the hell did I think I was going. I smiled and turned my hands palms up as if to say see, no shoplifting, and dropped from the platform to the pavement between two haulers. I was in a quiet street beside the supermarket. I scurried back toward the parking lot, reaching it through a tunnel-like passageway that led under a car ramp. Then I approached the Chevy at a crouch behind the cover of parked cars.

I came up to it from the rear and suddenly straightened beside the open driver's window with my .357 in the nose of whoever was behind the wheel.

He jumped about three feet with the most surprised looking pair of eyes I'd seen in years.

"Don't even blink," I hissed. "Keep both hands on the wheel."

He froze. He was about my age, mustached, with neatly trimmed black hair flecked with a grey that matched his suit. The hands on the steering wheel were knotted with muscle. He looked powerful and professional. I'd never seen him before.

I banged my pistol against his left armpit, and it hit something hard.

"Mira," he said, "*déjame explicar!*" Look, let me explain!

I tickled his nose with the muzzle of the Magnum. "Explain."

"I'm a cop. Captain Romero told me to keep an eye on you. He thought you might be doing some freelance investigating on the Pacheco murder."

Surprise, surprise.

"Which pocket has the badge?" I asked.

"Inside right of the jacket."

With the gun steady on his nose, I reached into his pocket with my left hand, pulling out a bulky wallet. There was a badge in there, all right. It was legitimate.

I stuck the wallet back in his pocket. "Tell Romero I'm still a

private citizen," I said. "He's not my boss. Or my babysitter."

"*Está bien*," he said.

"No more tail," I said.

He nodded. I put my gun back where it belonged.

"Sorry to shake you up," I said, "but I've been a P.I. for over twenty years and usually a tail is bad news."

"I was just doing what I was told." He smiled conciliatorily. I smiled. We were great friends.

I crossed the lot to my own car and drove out to Ashford Avenue. The green Chevy didn't follow me.

I spent the rest of the afternoon doing the same kind of routine case paperwork that Raquel had been doing. Before six I'd wrapped it up, and I went to a nearby Argentine restaurant for a dinner of churasco. The restaurant was next to the Condado Lagoon, and you could look out over the water to the lights of Miramar while you ate. It was romantic; the only other times I'd eaten there had been with Raquel.

I didn't enjoy the meal much, in spite of the three good-sized martinis I ordered. It was already dark when I went out to my car in the almost empty parking lot.

Maybe it was that third martini that made me drop my keys

as I was opening the car door. If so, it saved my life. I didn't hear the shot, just felt a searing sensation on my back at the same instant that my car window was shattered. I went all the way down and squished myself under the car. I wrenched my .357 from its holster—no easy feat under there—and peered out from between the front tires. There was no place to hide in the lot except in a parked car. Of the four other cars, only two, backed into spaces across from mine, would have allowed the shot that demolished my window. Both were late model Japanese sub-compacts. Beyond them spread the calm light-sprinkled water of the lagoon. So he was in one of those cars, but in the sparsely lit lot, I couldn't see into either.

The son of a bitch. My nerves were doing a lunatic tap dance. I was tempted to fire into the windshields of both of those cars. My back burned.

At that moment two other automobiles pulled into the lot as if in tandem. They parked to my left, closer to the restaurant, and four couples emerged. It was obvious that they formed a party from the high-pitched talk among them; it was equally obvious that they'd had a few. I stuck the gun in my beltline and wriggled out from

under my car at the rear. I Groucho Marxed the few steps into their festive group. "Startled" was too mild a word for their reaction. Just then one of the Japanese sub-compacts growled into life and squealed in a sharp S-turn out of the parking lot and into the narrow street. In a second it was out of sight around a corner. I'd never catch him. His license plate light had been out.

I made some stupid apology for frightening the partying group, and they walked hastily into the restaurant, regarding me with over-the-shoulder suspicion.

I climbed wearily into my Nissan and waited for my nerves to steady enough so that I could drive.

When I got home, I sadly surveyed the damage to both my side and rear car windows. More explaining to my insurance company.

A nearly new sport jacket ruined as well. There was a lot of blood on my back, but the bullet had cut a clean swath through the surface flesh without hitting any bone. It looked bad and felt bad, but it would repair itself. I bathed the wound, ruined a towel drying it, and then wrapped myself in gauze bandage. For some years I'd kept gauze bandage in the

medicine cabinet; fortunately, I hadn't had to use it too often.

Then I dialed the homicide division and asked for Captain Romero. He wasn't there, but he was on duty that night. I left a message for him to call me as soon as he got in.

I made myself a rum on the rocks and paced my living room. I switched on the TV, ran through all the channels, and switched it off. I made another rum on the rocks. Fifteen minutes later the phone rang.

"Well, Bannon, I see you got to Lourdes Canales before me," Romero said acidly. "And I hear you made a visit to the narcotics division."

"That's not important now, Moisés," I said. "Someone tried to shoot me tonight."

"Occasionally you do have good news," Romero said.

"He used a silencer. There aren't that many people running around San Juan with silencers."

"No, there aren't," he agreed. "But since he missed, maybe he was only trying to scare you off the Pacheco case."

"I doubt it. Look, I've got a question for you. And if you answer it right, I've got a suggestion that I think will break the Pacheco case."

"As easy as that," said Romero sarcastically. "What's the question?"

It was about twenty-four hours later.

We were parked on Fernandez Juncos, just off the San Antonio Bridge, where we had a good view of the entrance to the boat docks. To our left, the Condado Lagoon surrounded by expensive high-rises; to our right, the dark, oily expanse of San Juan Bay. Our other car was parked half a block behind us.

There were seven of us in all: Romero, myself, and two other homicide detectives in our car, and three more detectives in the other.

"What time is it?" I asked. "I can't see my watch."

"You should get one with luminous hands," Romero said. "It's nine forty."

"What's taking them so long?" I said. "Where did you put the stuff?"

"Under the floorboards in the cabin section. The anonymous caller told them just where to look."

"Whose boat is it?"

"My cousin's," Romero grinned. "A new thirty foot Bertram. He's an accountant: they make more money than homicide detectives."

"There's a car pulling over near the entrance," said our driver—he was the burly detective I'd seen with Romero the day before.

Romero contacted our other car. They'd already spotted the new arrival. While he was still talking to them, a second vehicle pulled up next to the first.

Two men got out of the first vehicle and another out of the second.

"That's them," said Romero. "The gate's open. We made it as easy as possible."

The three men disappeared through the dock entrance.

Romero checked his watch again. "They should find it real fast," he said. "They've been informed that there's no one on board."

"We can't see the boat from here," our driver said.

"It doesn't matter. When they come back with the stuff, we tail."

We sat in strained silence, watching the spot where the three had descended. In less than a dozen minutes they were back. All three were carrying packages. Two of them got into the first car and the other into the second. They backed out slowly into the traffic, headed in the direction of Santurce.

"All right," Romero barked to our other car, "here we go. If they separate, we'll take the first car and you take the second. Keep back, but not too far back. I don't want this blown."

At the end of the bridge, both cars angled left and climbed the curve onto Baldorioty. They proceeded along the lagoon towards the airport. But at the Minillas Tunnel, the lead car continued on Baldorioty while the second swung down into the tunnel.

"Okay, you're on your own," Romero called to our other car.

It was easy to follow on the wide, well lit Baldorioty. We tailed our quarry past the huge Llorens Torres housing project to an urbanization just short of the airport named El Palmar. Here they led us right up to the front of a pretty nice house on a residential street. When they pulled over, so did we, but a block back and with our lights off.

"As soon as they take the stuff in the house," Romero said.

"Good thing we got that warrant," said our driver.

The two men left the car and entered the house.

"Now," Romero said, and the four of us started at a trot with our guns drawn. We approached the house low, and the fourth member of our group, a slim athletic-looking man, slid stealthily to the door-knob and tried it. He signaled that it was locked, although the iron gate had been left open.

We surrounded the door. Romero rapid-fired five rounds into the two locks and we slammed through the door. The two of them were in the living room. One already had his gun out and was swinging it in our direction. The slim detective dropped him. The second man threw up his hands and backed slowly toward the wall.

The man on the floor was holding his stomach and moaning. He'd dropped his gun, and Romero kicked it away from him savagely.

On the coffee table were three large plastic packages of cocaine.

"Where do you keep the silencer, Barber?" Romero growled at the man moaning on the floor. It was the policeman who'd been following me the previous day. I'd also seen the other man the previous day—during my visit to the narcotics division.

I'd never seen the third man, whom I met an hour later at police headquarters. But he was another cop in the narcotics division. He'd been apprehended in his car outside of headquarters, where he had been waiting for his buddies so they could turn in the other three bags of cocaine he had in his car.

By then we'd already learned that the man shot in the stomach, my nocturnal sniper aka the Barber, had died from loss of blood before reaching the hospital.

That left Romero two to grill, and he would enjoy every minute of it. The only thing he hated worse than a crook was a crooked cop.

My question to him on the telephone had pulled everything together. It had been the obvious question: had he assigned anyone to follow me that afternoon? When that answer was negative, it naturally led to a second question: did he know of any cop nicknamed the Barber? He didn't, but he put out some feelers and learned that there was one in the narcotics division, a sergeant named Delgado who'd received this facetious moniker after revealing that he cut his own hair. The description of Delgado matched that of the cop who'd been tailing me.

It was as simple as that. He'd been careless—or overconfident, which is how they all get after too many successes.

And the interrogation of his two cohorts revealed just how successful they'd been up to then. They were anxious to talk because we weren't just talking narcotics dealing, we were talking *two* homicides, that of

Frank Pacheco and that of a dealer previously killed by Delgado, which had prompted Frank to say he wanted out of the confederacy.

According to them, Delgado had performed both murders alone. Ballistics later made a perfect match between the gun he'd drawn on us and the slugs that had killed both men; we found the silencer in a bedroom drawer in his house.

So my beer-drinking buddy had been involved in the stealing and resale of about half the narcotics these four beauties had confiscated over the past two years. Seven million dollars' worth. Their profits had been nicely laundered, folded, and stored in foreign banks.

You never know people as well as you think you do.

But in the end Frank had shown some conscience. His phone call to me had been his attempt from "beyond the grave" to blow the whistle on the whole foul operation. I wasn't on the police force, so I could be trusted to bring the affair to light. And I could take care of myself. I presume that's the way he thought.

In any case, his escape plan might very well have worked if he hadn't been foolish enough to go to Lourdes' place after his faked drowning. His erstwhile partners were skeptical of the

drowning, and they were keeping an eye on Lourdes' apartment.

Delgado had been following me specifically to kill me. One of the others—the one I recognized from my visit to the narcotics division—had heard me mention the Barber to Marcos Huerta. Huerta himself, it seems, had not been involved, though he must have half guessed what was going on, especially after talking to me. He was just very scared.

My ingenious contribution had been the idea of setting

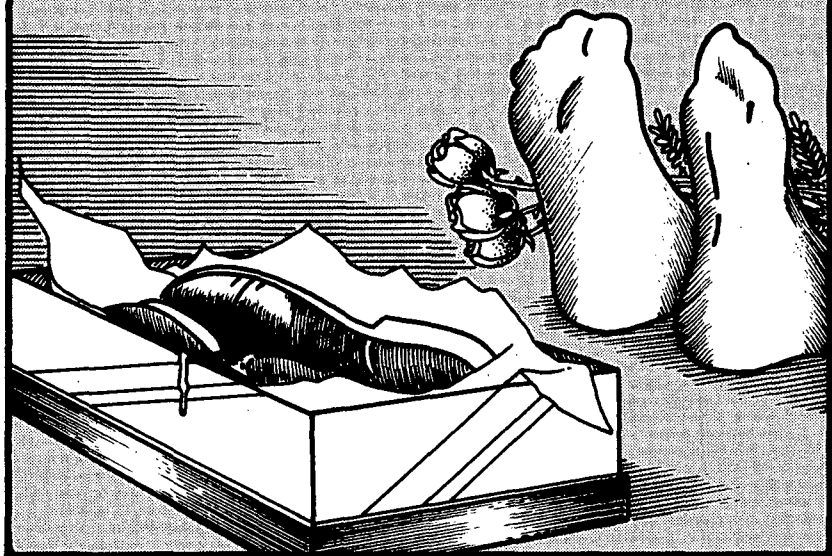
them up with an anonymous phone call about a cache of cocaine aboard a boat berthed at the bridge marina. Romero had supplied the boat and the cocaine, from the adequate supply at police headquarters.

That was about it. It left a thoroughly rotten taste in my mouth. True, Frank had drawn the line at murder, but he'd been guilty of the next worse thing. Police salaries were low, and the temptation of those available millions had been overpowering.

I washed out the rotten taste with half a bottle of Palo Viejo.

The Wrong Box

by Jackie Walsh



I sat amid the dark drifts of my father's clothes, the narrow closet sharply scented with mothballs and the astringent odor of his aftershave. My mother stood behind me and

hummed. "I've gone through all the suits," I said. "What's next?"

"Put them all in a Hefty bag, and I'll call June Goody tomorrow to come by and pick them

up. She works at the homeless shelter downtown now."

As if Haney, North Carolina, had a downtown, I thought, or any homeless.

"Mother—"

"Yes, Francine."

"Mother, you sound—"

"What, sweetheart?"

"Tranked out."

"You heard everyone today, Francine. It's for the best. At least he didn't suffer long. All those platitudes people tell you, those cliches, they got to be cliches for a good reason. They're true. It is for the best, and he didn't suffer long." Indeed, we had spent that afternoon at the funeral parlor, and all around us were women my mother's age or older. If you had glanced into the room, you might have thought it a meeting of the Haney Ladies' Auxiliary. Sometime in the afternoon, each in her turn had made a pronouncement that my father's sudden death one month after his retirement surprised no one. I wondered if my father would have agreed with this.

"It happens," my mother said, "too often. Man retires, and bingo, next thing you know, he's gone."

"Even so, Mom, you're taking this a little too well."

She had phoned me two nights ago, telling me in a matter of fact voice that my father

had died. When I asked her when, she had sighed and said, "Oh, sometime after lunch, he went in to take a nap." I had thought then that she was in shock and had half expected her to collapse into my arms in a weeping heap when she met me at the Charlotte airport, but she hadn't. In fact, instead of showing any signs of nervous strain, she just seemed happier and happier until she had reached the plateau of bliss she was on now.

"I'm a realist, Francine. Onward and upward. Get the shoes next." And she whirled around, the pleated skirt of her pink dress twirling around her slender legs.

"That dress is obscene," I shouted after her.

"I look awful in black," she shouted back.

"You're supposed to look awful, Mother, you're the damned widow."

I sat down hard on the little stool she had given me and pushed all my father's suits into a trio of plastic bags. It pained me to do it, not just because of the circumstances but because my father had always taken such pride in his appearance. He actually wore a tie just lounging around the house, and it didn't occur to me then that it was a little odd. It dawned on me soon enough

that it was odd he insisted I wear a dress at home. I had serviceable cotton dresses to play in during the summer while all my friends were wearing matching shorts sets.

I picked up a pair of my father's wingtips. I had wanted so desperately to clomp around in his shoes when I was little. His shoes were huge great leather rafts of shoes, always shined, always stored on shoe trees, which horrified me because I had thought for the longest time that they were artificial feet. I couldn't imagine the terrible slaughter that had caused so many American men to have lost their feet, an ailment so common that artificial feet were sold in Woolworth's.

My father had forbidden me to play in his shoes. Instead, I had tottered around on my mother's spike heels when I had played dressup.

I yanked out the shoe tree from one shoe and then the other. I had never realized before how many pairs of shoes he had owned. Some I remembered from my own distant childhood, some even predated me. I found a pair of spectator loafers tucked neatly back in a corner.

I glanced at my mother's side of the closet. Chaos. Not just because of my father's recent death. Well, in a way, it was. I

had waked up in the middle of the night and found my mother, wearing a pair of jeans and an old sweatshirt, tramping downstairs with a load of clothing, a soft stack of dresses in Easter basket colors, in her arms. I had asked her what she was doing. "Nothing, sweetheart," she had said, breathless, losing control of the unwieldy armload of clothing. "Go back to bed."

I had looked across the landing, into the guest bedroom, and realized what I had denied for almost a decade. My mother had moved out of my father's bedroom. "I was afraid it would upset you," she had said. "I just couldn't take the snoring."

"Mom," I said softly. "You don't need to lie any more. You don't need to protect him. He's dead."

She had blinked quickly, as if startled by strong light. Her chin moved, just barely; then she said, "You mean you know?"

"I always knew."

"I didn't want you to."

"I know. I understand, Mom—"

"Well," she had said briskly. "I'll just get these downstairs. You get back to bed, sweetie. Or, I know, why don't you come downstairs in a few minutes and I'll make us some cocoa."

"I'll make it," I had said, and followed her downstairs.

As different as they were, they still had the same habits, I thought. They both kept all their clothing. I saw shoes of my mother's that I remembered from Sundays at church decades ago. "Why does she keep all this," I muttered to myself. "Why?"

"I'll tell you why, Francine. And I'll tell you why June Goody keeps a pair of my shoes in her closet. Why there's a pair of my shoes in the trunk of my car. They're hidden in the garage. They're on the boat, and there's a pair in the barn. Because the one time I tried to get away, he wouldn't give me my shoes. No shoes. Tell me, Francine, what would you have done?"

"Gone barefoot."

"Down Red Branch Road at midnight? Would you have?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"What if you were carrying something heavy?"

I looked down. "I don't know."

Her voice was a whisper. "That's what I thought."

"But I'd make sure I had plenty of shoes around if I needed them."

"What a smart girl you are," she said, her voice brightening. "You are your mother's daughter. Now." She bent down to the

remaining pairs of my father's shoes. "Help me get these loaded into your father's old duffel bag."

And with something approaching abandon, we untreed his shoes and flung them into the olive green bag. In the end, we tossed in the shoe trees after them.

The next morning, before the funeral, June Goody drove off, the trunk of her Bonneville scraping the pavement with the weight of my father's worldly goods. My mother was now appropriately clothed in dark blue, which was as close to black as I could talk her into. She waved goodbye to June, and I said, "Mother, did you give Mr. Peavy a pair of Dad's shoes?"

"What a silly question, Francine. Bye, now! Bye, Junebug!"

"Mother."

"Well, honestly, sweetheart, what do you think?"

"Mother."

"Well, can you blame me?"

"Mother."

"Francine, why should I give Mr. Peavy and your father a pair of perfectly nice Florshems to just molder away when someone could be making good use of them? Besides, they've got those cardboard things. I'm sure they're just as nice looking as real shoes."

"Give me the keys to your car."

"Why?"

"I'm going to the mall."

"You are not. We've got to be at the funeral parlor by eleven."

"I'll make it there. Give me your keys."

"I'll go."

"You can't!"

"I can so. I may be the widow, but that doesn't mean I can't go shopping."

"People will talk."

"They talked before, and nothing came of it. Now, don't be silly. I know Betty Tompkins is coming to pick you up, and you two have got some catching up to do."

"Mom, this isn't a social occasion. This is the last time I'll see Dad."

"Do you want one of my Valiums?"

"No, Mother, I want to get Daddy some shoes."

"He'll get them if you'll just stop being hysterical and let me go. I know where he liked to buy them, I know the salesman by name, I buy Girl Scout cookies from his granddaughter."

"Don't give me that look, Mother."

"Don't give me any lip, Francine. I'm going by myself, and that's the last I want to hear of it. I promise I'll get this taken

care of by the time the funeral starts. I promise."

As I watched her drive away, the phone rang. "Is Emma Gordon there?" A man's voice, heavy with age, but not old.

"Who's calling?"

"Ray, Ray Edwards. Is this Francine?"

"It is."

He paused. "Francine, honey, I'm sorry about your daddy. Now, can I talk to your mama?"

"She's not here. She had some personal business to take care of."

"I see. Well, hon, if I can help, you just give me a call. Ray Edwards, Edwards Cadillac. I'll be here all day and if she needs me, you just give me a holler, and I'll be there in two shakes."

"You won't be at the funeral?"

"Oh no. No, sweetheart. I don't think that would be right."

I wanted to dislike him but couldn't. He sounded husky, a big burly man, but genuine. He sounded genuine. And most of all, he sounded kind.

"I'll tell her, Mr. Edwards. And thank you."

I paced the carpet in the hall, the double doors closed behind me, Mr. Peavy's son Brad standing at loose attention on the other side of me. She was cutting it fine, I thought, and

sighed loudly in relief as my mother hurried up the back hallway. "I never thought I'd get here. Two for one sale at Florsheim's today of all days, well, half off the second pair, anyway." She handed the bag to Brad Peavy, who slipped into the room that held my father's casket.

She paced the hallway, and when Brad opened the doors, she glanced worriedly at him. "Any problems?"

"No problems at all, Mrs. Gordon."

"Good. Oh, good. Now, come on, Francine." She took my hand and led me up to the casket where my father's body lay. "Be brave."

I glanced at her, almost made a remark, but Brad returned, handing my mother the Florsheim's box.

She held it through the ceremony as if it were a talisman.

At last I let the numbness lift, and people clustered around us, offering us their sympathy and promising to see us at the cemetery. At last we were the only two left standing in the hall. Through the wide front doors, against the glare of the summer afternoon, I thought I saw a white Cadillac

with tinted windows waiting at the end of the driveway.

Mother was pushing something at me, and I realized she was handing me her car keys. "You go on to the cemetery, Francine, and don't wait for me."

"Mom—"

"Oh, and here." She handed me the shoebox. I looked dazedly at it, and something registered, far back in my mind.

"Mom—"

"What is it, Francine?"

"Didn't Dad wear a thirteen and a half E?"

"Well, of course he did, sweetheart, he had feet like barges."

"This says ten D." I pointed to the box.

"Does it?" She peered at the mark on the end of the box. "I can't see, I left my glasses at home. Oh, they must have given me the wrong box."

I watched her walk briskly down the brick sidewalk to the end of the driveway where Ray Edwards waited for her. The pleated skirt of her navy dress swung with the rhythm of her walk, and when she flung open the car door, I heard a man's deep, soothing voice and for the first time in years, I heard my mother laugh.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by Rick Olivo

Field work for a gumshoe? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

The Recalcitrant Witness

by C. M. Chan



It was cold in the Cottlesdon police station because the boiler had broken down for the fourth time in as many months. Outside, a fine rain was falling steadily, making it damp as well as cold. Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons rubbed his hands surreptitiously beneath the table and wished he'd worn a jumper under his jacket. The atmosphere in the inter-

view room was no warmer than the temperature. Gibbons and his superior, Superintendent Wallace Carmichael of New Scotland Yard, were being briefed by Chief Inspector Peters of the local constabulary on the crime they had come to investigate. Peters clearly resented the fact that Scotland Yard had been called in, and his antagonism was almost

tangible. Even Carmichael, who had years of experience in dealing with local police of every sort of temperament, had had little success in making Peters more amiable. For the last fifteen minutes, he had abandoned the attempt and let Peters get on with his obviously prearranged monologue.

Peters had reached the point where he was explaining to them that he knew exactly who had committed the murder but had thus far been unable to produce enough evidence for an arrest. He implied that evidence would have been forth coming in a matter of hours had he not been interrupted by Scotland Yard.

P.C. Wilkes, the local constable for Biggleswade where the crime had taken place, looked uncomfortable. He had been called upon at various points in the monologue to second Peters' opinion, and he had done so in a colorless voice. Now he hesitated as Peters paused to allow him to agree with the obvious guilt of Nick Londree, but one look at the chief inspector's face was enough to convince him that to say anything more than "yes, sir," would be imprudent.

"Yes, sir," he said and looked unhappy.

Gibbons noticed the hesitation, saw by the quick look in

his direction that Carmichael had noticed it as well, and sighed very softly. Wilkes had been first on the scene of the crime, he had first interviewed Londree there, but he had so far not been called upon to say more than two words together. Still, Peters could not go on for much longer. He had handed over the reports, he had presented the crime, the evidence, and the culprit—what more was there to do?

Peters gave them a copy of Londree's police record, pointing out that he had been in prison and had had run-ins with the law on any number of occasions since his release, and that he was, in general, a very violent man.

"Splendid, chief inspector, splendid," said Carmichael heartily when the monologue had finished. "You've explained everything most clearly. We'll just have a look around Biggleswade and make our report. You've been most uncommonly helpful."

"Very well," said Peters, unmollified. "If you're satisfied, I'll be off. I have a great deal to do just now."

"Yes, yes, we mustn't keep you," replied Carmichael.

"Wilkes," said Peters as he turned to the door, "you'd best get back now, too."

"I'd like to keep him for just a few minutes more," said Carmichael before Wilkes could reply. "I just need to go over the local geography. We'll be going to Biggleswade directly anyhow."

"Very well," said Peters curtly, and departed.

The others left behind all heaved a collective sigh.

"Thank God that's over," muttered Carmichael. He took out a cigar and lit it, releasing a stream of blue smoke contentedly.

"Now then, constable," he said, "I'd like to hear from you about what you found at the scene."

"Yes, sir," said Wilkes, marshaling his thoughts.

"But first," continued Carmichael, "I'd like to know why you think Londree's innocent."

Wilkes looked up, surprised and a little unsure of himself.

"You do, don't you?"

Wilkes licked his lips. "Yes, sir," he said. "Although, I have to say, sir, that everything the chief inspector told you about him is true. And Londree hates the police—doesn't trust us as far as he could throw us."

"But you still think he's innocent, even though you found him on the scene?"

"Yes, sir," Wilkes nodded. "See, I've gotten to know him over the years, him being in

trouble so much. And he's clever, no doubt about it. But the thing is, he liked Arthur Kerns. They weren't best mates or anything, but he was fond of the old man. Even if Arthur had crossed him—and we've found nothing to indicate he did—Londree'd never have killed him. Londree hasn't got what you'd call a temper—more like a need to settle scores."

"A taste for vengeance," murmured Carmichael.

"That's it, sir."

"And you believe," put in Gibbons, "that he refuses to tell us anything he might have witnessed because of his dislike of the police?"

"More than that, sir. I think he's out to get the killer himself."

"Oh dear." Carmichael was half amused. "Doesn't trust us to do it, eh?"

"No, sir." Wilkes sighed. "I could be wrong, sir. But that's my honest feeling."

"What did he say when you found him there?"

"Told me to bugger off." Wilkes shrugged; he did not appear to object overly to the remark. "But that's another thing, sir. Other times, when I know he's been up to no good, he's always been saucylike. Got a lot of what the cat cleans her paws with. But that day Arthur

died, he was upset. Angry and, well, not really hearing anything I said to him."

"Distracted?" suggested Carmichael.

"That's it, sir."

"Tell me, constable, do you like Mr. Londree?"

"Like?" Wilkes was faintly surprised. "Well, no, sir. I can't say that I do," he replied, as if confessing to a fault in his character. "He's a lot of trouble to me, one way or another, and it's not like he's ever very pleasant."

"I see," said Carmichael. "Well, constable, perhaps you would be good enough to show us over the scene of the crime. You can tell us the sequence of events as we drive down."

"It'll be my pleasure, sir," said Wilkes.

The late Arthur Kerns's house was a late Georgian gem, a small manor house set on a slope above the river. A wide lawn swept downhill to the water, just visible over the tree-tops. The view widened where the trees opened up to allow access to a small jetty, to which was moored a dinghy. About three-quarters of the way down the lawn was a small one room building that bore signs of a recent fire. A plastic sheet had

been spread over one end where the roof had collapsed.

"Arthur was in there," said Wilkes, pointing to the small building. "Been hit over the head and knocked unconscious. It was the smoke from the fire that killed him."

"That was his studio?" asked Carmichael.

"Yes, sir. He became quite the painter after he retired."

Carmichael surveyed the scene. "Someone in a boat gave the alarm?"

"Ken Mainwaring. He was coming up the river when he saw the smoke and radioed in to shore."

"Does Mr. Mainwaring live in Biggleswade?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He runs an antique shop in the village."

"Well, let's go down and view the scene while we've still got some light left." Carmichael's voice betrayed disgruntlement. They had been late leaving London that morning, and when they had arrived in Cottesdon, Chief Inspector Peters had been out on a case. As a result, it was now past four.

There was not much to see in any event. The fire had been started at one end of the studio, where a large single window faced to the north. The burnt remains of an easel lay on the floor beneath it, and nearby stood a charred table. A chair

with only the metal frame remaining stood to one side; between it and the table was where the body had lain.

The walls were covered with paintings, hung closely together. At the northern end of the building were only the charred remains of stretchers and frames, but at the opposite end the paintings were unharmed aside from a layer of soot. The vast majority were landscapes in oils of Arthur Kerns's own manufacture; only a quarter of those were framed. Dotted here and there, however, were paintings in different styles. Wilkes had no information about them, although when the signatures were legible he was able to recognize the names of other local artists. Two bore a striking resemblance to a Turner and a Monet, but the signatures read "Londree."

"He does copies of famous artists," explained Wilkes. "Sells them in his art gallery."

"Did he ever sell any of Mr. Kerns's things?" asked Carmichael.

"Sometimes I believe he did, sir," said Wilkes. He turned to the far end of the room. "There's the Picasso," he said.

Chief Inspector Peters had covered the Picasso in his monologue. By all accounts it was the only thing in the studio

worth stealing, but it had not been touched. Kerns had gotten it during World War II, when he had met the great artist. He was very proud of it, and pretty much the whole village knew the story.

"I wonder Mrs. Bradley's just left it here," said Gibbons.

"She's not very interested in art," offered Wilkes.

Carmichael raised his eyebrows. "We'd best go up to the house and see her," he said.

Emma Bradley was a neat-looking woman in her mid-sixties with bright eyes and a wealth of iron grey hair which she wore brushed back and fastened with a clasp at the nape of her neck. She had come as housekeeper to Arthur Kerns fifteen years ago, but that arrangement had not lasted long. Within a year she was the lady of the house in all but name, and she and Arthur had, according to Wilkes, always been quite happy together. Why they had never married, he couldn't say.

Carmichael could ask, though.

She shrugged. "My husband was still living when I came to Arthur," she answered. "By the time he died, it didn't seem to matter any more."

"I see," said Carmichael, disappointed. An estranged hus-

band was a good candidate for murderer; a dead husband was nothing of the kind. "Now, Mrs. Bradley," he continued, "I know you've gone over this before, but could you just describe your movements on the day of Mr. Kerns's death?"

She nodded obediently. "I went to do the church flowers in the morning," she said. "Elsie Green and I do them together and then go for coffee, but she was ill that day so I came back early. Lynn—that's Arthur's granddaughter—was coming to lunch, but she had already arrived when I got here about eleven. Nick Londree was here, too, to give Arthur some money. He went down to find Arthur in the studio, and then they both came back and we all had some tea."

"Did Mr. Kerns and Mr. Londree seem on good terms at that time?" asked Carmichael.

Emma smiled. "Oh, yes," she said. "I'm pretty sure they'd had a quick glass or two of Arthur's homemade wine while they were in the studio, and they were both in very high spirits." Her eyes twinkled mischievously at this pun. "Left to himself, Arthur didn't drink much, but anybody stopping by at any time was enough to make him drag out one of those bottles. It didn't taste very

good, but it was awfully strong."

"I see," said Carmichael, amused. "Please continue."

"Well, Arthur had his cuppa and went straight back to the studio. Lynn and I chatted for a bit, and Nick fell asleep on the settee there—the result, I'm sure, of that wine. Lynn and I left to do the shopping at about twelve thirty. We left a note for Nick, telling him to stay to lunch if he liked."

The shopping expedition had been confirmed by Peters. At the relevant time, Arthur Kerns's granddaughter and mistress, who between them would inherit all his wealth, had been in full view of half the village, picking out ham for sandwiches.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Bradley," said Carmichael. "I understand you know of no one who would wish Mr. Kerns harm?"

All at once her eyes misted over, but she kept her composure. "No," she answered softly, "no one."

Neither did Constable Wilkes. Thus far, no one had been able to discover why anybody should want to murder a gentle, slightly eccentric old man.

Ken Mainwaring was just closing his antique shop when

they got back to Biggleswade, having dropped Wilkes at his home on the way. He looked considerably surprised to see them.

"Scotland Yard, eh?" he said. "Well, I don't know what they've called you in for. After all, nothing was stolen."

Carmichael's eyebrows bristled.

"Would you have expected something to be stolen, Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Well," Mainwaring looked around his shop, "I've got some nice bits in here, if I do say so myself. Some of it easily portable, too. That vase over there—"

"Mr. Mainwaring," interrupted Carmichael, "we are investigating the death of Arthur Kerns."

"Oh!" Mainwaring looked stricken. "Of course you are."

"Why did you think we had come?"

"Well, it's been on my mind," said Mainwaring apologetically. "Last week someone broke into my shop. Went through things pretty thoroughly, but nothing was taken. I reported it anyhow."

"Very rightly, sir. Now, if we could ask you about the day of Mr. Kerns's death?"

Ken Mainwaring had taken that day off, leaving the shop in charge of a part-time employee.

He had taken his sailboat upriver and had come abreast of the Kerns house just before one thirty. He had noticed the smoke and, as he had come to the break in the trees, had been able to see the flames rising from the roof of the studio. Not seeing either Emma or Arthur about, he had used his radio to ask the Coast Guard to call the fire brigade.

"I never thought of Arthur being inside," he said regretfully. "If I had, I could have pulled into the jetty and maybe saved him. But I just assumed—Arthur smoked a pipe, you know—I just assumed an ember had gotten loose among the turps."

"If the fire had reached the roof, I'm afraid Mr. Kerns was already dead by then," said Carmichael. "Did you know him well, Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Fairly well. He and Emma have bought some things from me over the years. I've been to the house occasionally."

"Did you like him?"

Mainwaring grinned. "Everybody liked old Arthur," he said. "He may have been a bit barmy, but he was happy. He was so happy that you were happy when you were with him."

"That's an epitaph I'm sure we all wish we could have,"

said Carmichael. "Thank you very much for your time, sir."

Outside, Carmichael led the way to the car.

"Did you want to see if Londree's still at his gallery, sir?" asked Gibbons.

"No, I don't think so," answered Carmichael. "I've an idea about that. Let's head back to Cottlesdon and get some supper."

Gibbons obediently got into the car and backed out of the parking space.

"I think, lad," said Carmichael as they drove through the village, "that I'll let you have first shot at Londree."

"Me, sir?" said Gibbons, pleased but surprised.

"According to Wilkes, Londree hates authority, and police authority in particular. From that point of view, there's nothing worse than a C.I.D. superintendent. You're closer to his age than I am, too. Perhaps that will help. And I think, Gibbons, that we'll make it very casual."

"Casual, sir?"

"Wilkes said he was a regular at the local. My idea is that you drop round there after supper and have a little chat with him. If that doesn't work, I can always see him tomorrow after we've looked into Mainwaring's movements on the river.

Mainwaring was on the scene. He could have moored at that jetty and committed the murder himself."

Gibbons nodded. "I noticed Chief Inspector Peters didn't look into that angle," he said.

"Peters!" Carmichael snorted. "You know, Gibbons, ordinarily I like to come to a case unprejudiced, but this time, I'll be very disappointed if Londree's guilty."

Gibbons chuckled. "Me, too, sir," he said.

On Wilkes's recommendation, they had booked rooms at the Colton Arms in Cottlesdon, and they decided to dine there now. They went over their notes as they ate and made a tentative schedule for the morrow. They were just finishing their coffee when they were interrupted by a large Russian wolfhound, gently waving its beautifully feathered tail in greeting.

"Good Lord, Phillip," said Gibbons, addressing the dog's owner who appeared behind the animal.

"Hello, Jack, superintendent," said Phillip Bethancourt, pulling out a chair. "Down, Cerberus," he added to the dog.

"Well, I might have known you'd be around," said Carmichael, puffing at his cigar.

"But, Phillip," said Gibbons, automatically stroking the dog's ears, "I thought you were in Monte Carlo with Marla. She's a fashion model, you know, sir," he added to Carmichael. "They were shooting pictures there."

Carmichael raised a bushy eyebrow. "Monte Carlo?" he said. "How much did you lose?"

"One hundred and fifty," said Bethancourt calmly, and Carmichael pursed his lips in a whistle.

"Well, it's nice to be rich," he said.

Bethancourt grinned at him. "We got back this morning," he said, "and I rang you, Jack, only to be told you'd gone off on a murder case. I had some things to take care of in town, but then I drove down here to find you." He turned to Carmichael. "You will let me follow Jack around while he's investigating, won't you, superintendent? You know it's what I live for."

"Put like that, I don't see how I can refuse," replied Carmichael, also mindful of the fact that Bethancourt's father had gone to school with the chief commissioner.

"Splendid!" Bethancourt beamed at him.

"Well," said Carmichael, draining his coffee cup, "I'll let Gibbons here fill you in—I've

got to see Lynn Kerns." He pushed his chair back and rose. "We'll interview her fiancé together tomorrow," he said to Gibbons. "Unless, of course, he's with her now. Don't be too long getting to that pub." He nodded to Bethancourt and left.

Bethancourt ordered a pint of bitter, lit a cigarette, and prepared to listen to Gibbons' resume of the case.

"And what is the plan for this evening?" he asked when Gibbons had finished.

"I've been told off to see this chap Londree," said Gibbons.

"I should have thought that would be Carmichael's job."

"Carmichael thought I might have a better chance at getting something out of him with a casual approach," replied Gibbons.

"You said he'd been in trouble with the police before?" asked Bethancourt.

"Yes." Gibbons looked through the notes scattered over the table and selected a sheet of paper. "Londree was convicted of art forgery nine years ago," he said. "When he got out of prison, he opened up a small art gallery in the village, which has done moderately well." Gibbons grinned. "He still does forgeries," he said, "but now he signs his own name and sells them in his gallery as copies. There are sev-

eral other artists in the area whose stuff he sells, and he occasionally gets something in from London when he has the money. There's been nothing openly odd about his business, although the police have had suspicions from time to time. However, Londree has been in a number of scraps over the years. As an example," Gibbons' eye slid down the page, "there was the case of Ken Mainwaring, a local antique dealer. He bought one of Londree's copies, reframed it so the signature couldn't be seen, and sold it as an original. It all came to naught as far as charges went, but Mainwaring turned up shortly thereafter badly beaten with multiple fractures in his left arm. He didn't press any charges either, but the local constable and half the village knew Londree had done it."

"Sort of a warning?"

"More like revenge," answered Gibbons. "For a little while, it was looking like Londree would come up on forgery charges again. There are several other incidents like that—a neighbor who decided part of Londree's property was his."

"He must be a vicious fighter," remarked Bethancourt.

"Apparently so, although not always victorious. He's also the local ladies' man. According to the constable, there's hardly a woman in the area he hasn't had. To give him his due, they apparently go after him most of the time, although I can't imagine why. Wilkes pointed him out to us today, and he's not very prepossessing."

"You were saying he wasn't always victorious."

"Oh yes. Well, one local lady's husband found out about his wife's indiscretion. He rounded up a couple of his mates and beat Londree senseless."

"Did Londree retaliate?"

"Oddly enough, no. Maybe he felt he deserved it."

Bethancourt lit a cigarette. "Your Mr. Londree intrigues me," he said. "Where do we find him? At the art gallery?"

"No," said Gibbons. "Londree's apparently a regular at the local pub."

The pub in Biggleswade was very crowded, the result of there being a darts match that evening. Gibbons and Bethancourt edged their way through the crowd by the door, Gibbons vainly striving for a glimpse of his quarry amid the crush.

"The bar's over that way," he said, gesturing. "We'd best get a pint for ourselves and then

see if we can spot Londree anywhere."

Bethancourt nodded acquiescence to this plan, and they began to make their way toward the bar, which was straight ahead. To their right, the room opened out and was fitted with tables and benches. Bethancourt's gaze drifted over the clientele seated at the tables while he waited for Gibbons to find a path through the large knot of men who were blocking their progress. His attention was caught by a woman seated alone. Her features were not fine enough for beauty, and in Bethancourt's opinion she could have shed ten or fifteen pounds, but her coloring was extraordinary. She wore no makeup beyond a pale pink lipstick, and it would have been foolish of her to try to improve on what God had given her. Her skin was translucent and colored like a blush rose. Her hair and lashes were gold, and her eyes were a pale, clear green. No painter could have achieved such perfection with his palette. For a moment, Bethancourt simply stared. The next instant, he became aware that Gibbons had moved away from him and he started to follow, still half turned toward the woman. As a result, he stumbled solidly into a massive form wielding a pint of beer in either

hand. He was cursed soundly from above while he righted himself and tried to apologize.

Bethancourt was just over six feet, but this man towered over him. His shoulders were as broad as an ox cart, and his great arms, corded with muscle, were as thick as young trees. He would have been goodlooking if his face had held any sort of animation or intelligence; as it was, the rocklike impression created by the rest of him continued in his face. Nor, it seemed, did he possess a sense of humor.

"You've nearly spilt the bloody beer," he said accusingly, leaving off cursing in favor of whole sentences.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Bethancourt. Gazing up into the steely eyes gave his words added sincerity. There was an air of suppressed violence about the man; no gentle giant here. "I'll be happy to pay for another couple of pints . . ."

The man eyed his drinks and shook his head. "Nah," he grunted, abruptly relenting, and pushed past into the crowd. Bethancourt, staring after him, was surprised to see him approach the solitary woman. He set both pints on the table and joined her on the bench.

"That's Jake," said a man standing next to Bethancourt. "Jack Collier. He's our ace."

"What?" asked Bethancourt, turning. "Your ace?"

"In the darts match," explained the man. "Best shot we've got. Best shot anybody's got, actually."

"He's certainly a well-grown specimen," observed Bethancourt.

The man laughed. "That he is. Nearly killed a man once—not that he meant to. Just got into a brawl and hit too hard."

"I can believe it," said Bethancourt. "Is that his wife?"

"Yes. Wouldn't look at her too closely, if I was you. Jake's a little touchy where Gillian's concerned."

"I don't intend to look at her at all," replied Bethancourt, firmly turning his back on the pair. "Are you on the darts team, too?"

"Certainly am. Ben Holt." He stuck out his hand.

"Phillip Bethancourt. I'll look forward to seeing you play later. When's the match to start?"

"Half an hour or so. Not everybody's here yet."

Bethancourt wished him good luck and followed Gibbons to the bar.

"Thought I'd lost you," said Gibbons, handing him a pint.

"Thanks," said Bethancourt, taking a sip and getting out his cigarettes. "Spotted Londree yet?"

"Right over there." Gibbons nodded toward a man halfway down the bar.

Londree was hunched over a pint, a thin, wiry man of medium height in his late thirties. He was not very handsome and looked untidy. His dark hair needed cutting, and his chin showed two days' worth of stubble. His tweed jacket was baggy and shapeless, and there was a hole in the knee of his jeans. But there was, thought Bethancourt, something appealing about him nonetheless. He could not put his finger on it, but he was not surprised that so many women found him attractive.

Beside Londree lounged a dark-haired woman of about forty. Her makeup was slightly overdone, and her purple satin blouse seemed inappropriate to the circumstances. She was talking earnestly to Londree, who appeared to be ignoring her. As they watched, she laid a hand on his shoulder which he shrugged off.

"I think it's time to make contact," said Gibbons. "Doesn't look as if that's a tête-à-tête he'd mind having broken up."

They moved toward Londree and in a few minutes had succeeded in establishing themselves next to him at the bar.

"Mr. Londree?" said Gibbons, smiling ingratiatingly. "I was wondering if I might have a word with you."

Londree raised one eyebrow and regarded him quizzically. "Looks like you're having it," he said. He turned to the woman beside him. "Take yourself off, Sheila."

"But, Nick—"

"You heard the gentleman, Sheila. He doesn't want a gossip like you listening in on his business. Now, bugger off."

Sheila shot him a sulky look but obediently collected her drink and moved away.

Londree returned his attention to Gibbons. "You're not an artist," he stated.

"No," agreed Gibbons. "My name's Jack Gibbons. I'm with Scotland Yard."

"Oh Lord," groaned Londree. "I might have known they'd drag in the bloody Yard." His eye fell on Bethancourt. "He your sergeant?"

"No, I'm the sergeant," answered Gibbons. "This is my friend, Phillip Bethancourt."

"Up for a holiday, eh?" asked Londree, shaking Bethancourt's proffered hand.

"In a way," said Bethancourt. "I like to follow Jack around when he's on a case and annoy him."

"Great friend you must be," said Londree, but he was

clearly puzzled by Bethancourt's status.

Bethancourt merely smiled.

"Mr. Londree," said Gibbons, "the local police are of the opinion that you know something about Arthur Kerns's murder that you don't want to divulge."

"No, are they really?"

"They seem to think that you don't wish us to have this information because you have some idea of avenging Mr. Kerns's death yourself."

"Balls," said Londree succinctly. "The police think I did it myself."

Gibbons grinned. "Chief Inspector Peters did say that," he agreed. "However, your local constable doesn't agree. He is under the impression that you were fond of Mr. Kerns, and while he agrees that you might have roughed him up a bit if he had gotten on your bad side, he does not believe you would have deliberately murdered him, no matter what the provocation."

"Good old George," said Londree, referring to the constable. "And what do you think?"

"Seeing as how Constable Wilkes knows you far better than Chief Inspector Peters, I'm inclined to take the constable's word. So, I might add, is my superior."

"Well, who would ever have guessed? Maybe Scotland Yard is all it's cracked up to be after all." Londree sipped at his beer and cocked an eye at Bethancourt. "What about you, sunshine?"

"I think you're very capable of murder," said Bethancourt easily. "But I don't think you did this one."

Londree looked him up and down, very carefully. Then he shrugged and turned back to his drink. "Takes one to know one," he said.

Bethancourt grinned, Gibbons coughed, and Londree sipped his beer.

"Mr. Londree," said Gibbons, "I understand that your opinion of the police is not high, but have you really considered how dangerous the course of action you're pursuing is? You could well end up murdered yourself."

"Has it occurred to you that I wouldn't be in danger if I didn't have the police rushing round to hang on my every word?" Londree snorted. "And you're supposed to protect people. You stupid burkes couldn't protect a mouse from the stable cat."

Gibbons flushed slightly, but his tone remained reasonable. "May I point out, Mr. Londree, that you would be in no danger at all if you would simply tell us what you know."

"It would be simple if I knew anything. Look, I'll run over it for you one more time: I saw nothing and I heard nothing."

"And you're saying nothing."

"Got it in one."

"If you saw nothing and heard nothing, then why do you persistently refuse to discuss the details of what you were doing?"

"No point, is there?"

Gibbons sighed and tried his last tack. "Come on, Mr. Londree, have a heart. I'm just a lowly sergeant trying to do my job. I'm asking you as nicely as I can: won't you please tell me what you witnessed, for all our sakes?"

"You Scotland Yard types don't listen very well," replied Londree. "I didn't witness anything. There's nothing to tell."

Gibbons sighed again and finished off the last of his beer. "Well, it's been nice chatting, Mr. Londree," he said. "I'll probably be seeing you tomorrow."

Londree looked a little surprised. "So soon?"

"My superior will no doubt wish to speak to you."

"Oh, no," groaned Londree, "not another chief inspector."

"Superintendent, actually."

"Well, well. So I'm coming up in the world."

*

"He does know something," said Gibbons to Bethancourt as they moved away from the bar.

"Yes," agreed Bethancourt thoughtfully. He looked back at the bar, where Londree had been joined by another woman, this one far more attractive than the last and very angry. Londree seemed unimpressed by her fireworks and was ordering another pint.

"Quite a ladies' man," he murmured, half to himself.

"What?" asked Gibbons.

"Ladies' man," said Bethancourt, nodding at the bar.

"Wilkes said as much. What does that have to do with it?"

Bethancourt grinned. "Let's put Marla onto him."

Gibbons was astounded. "Marla?" he repeated. "Why Marla?"

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "You're joking, Jack," he said. "It must be obvious that to any connoisseur of women Marla is surely in the nature of an ultimate goal."

"That's not what I meant," replied Gibbons. "What I meant was that Marla would surely refuse to do it." Everyone knew of her abhorrence of Bethancourt's hobby.

"Oh, I don't know," said Bethancourt. "If approached in the right way, she's very amenable."

*

"Actually, Marla," said Bethancourt into the phone when they'd returned to the inn, "Jack's got a favor to ask of you."

"Jack?" she asked, surprised, while Gibbons glared at his friend from the other side of the bed.

Bethancourt launched into a moving account of how much Gibbons' career meant to him and of how this recalcitrant witness stood between him and promotion. Everyone had tried and everyone had failed to get the needed information from this man. For Marla the elicitation of this evidence would be child's play. The man was known to have an eye for the ladies. After an evening spent in Marla's company, he would be putty in her hands. Only she could stand between Jack and demotion to constable.

"Let me see if I've got this clear," she said. "You want me to rush down there, hop into bed with this man, and, in the intimate aftermath, drag information about some murder out of him."

Bethancourt was wickedly tempted to say, "Well, Marla, he's reputed to be very good in bed," but restrained himself. "You haven't been listening, Marla," he said reproachfully. "I freely admit a lesser woman might have to go to those

lengths, but a woman such as yourself could surely achieve results after ten or twenty minutes of suggestive conversation. At least, that's what Jack said, and I said it never hurt to ask. And this man's a very amusing bloke—at least it wouldn't be boring."

Marla hesitated. Then, "Let me speak to Jack," she said.

Bethancourt bit his lip. "She wants to talk to you."

"Oh God," moaned Gibbons.

"Buck up, man. We've almost got her."

Gibbons reluctantly took the phone. "Hello, Marla," he said. "It's awfully nice of you to consider this."

"Is it really going to help you, Jack?" she asked dubiously.

"The difference between life and death," he assured her.

"Tell her you thought of her instantly, only didn't like to ask," hissed Bethancourt.

"I thought of you at once, but I didn't like to ask for such a big favor," said Gibbons.

There was a brief pause.

"If I do this for you, Jack, you'll owe me," she said warningly.

"Eternally in your debt," replied Gibbons glibly.

She sighed. "All right," she said. "Tell me what train I can catch. I can make something tomorrow afternoon or evening."

*

Carmichael had found Lynn Kerns to be a pleasant young woman, very distressed about her grandfather's death but of no great help where the investigation was concerned. Her account of her movements tallied with Emma Bradley's; she added that she had arrived early for lunch because she had forgotten that Emma would be at the church. Londree had arrived just after she did; she had let him in, and they had been chatting when Emma returned.

Carmichael thanked her for her time and asked if she thought her fiancé would be available for questioning tomorrow.

"You should ring him," she said. "It's his day off tomorrow—he works in the Daimler showroom here—and he's going to see his parents. You see," she explained sadly, "they were supposed to come round to dinner tomorrow to meet Granddad and Emma. Emma had a whole menu planned out." She sighed. "We've put it off, of course, but Don thought he'd better go out and spend the day with them. Look here, I'll ring him now and find out when he's leaving."

"Thank you," said Carmichael.

She moved to the phone and in a few minutes was asking

Carmichael if he could make it before eleven.

"Certainly. Would ten o'clock do?"

She spoke into the phone and then nodded. In another moment she had rung off, and Carmichael thanked her again and took his leave.

Ten o'clock did not really suit him; he had wanted to get an early start looking for other witnesses along the river. Well, that was just the way things fell out sometimes. They could spend the afternoon on the river and he could interview Londree afterwards if Gibbons failed tonight.

Donald Blake lived in a modern cottage two or three miles out of Biggleswade. He was standing on his porch when they arrived, bent over a wicker table there. He waved at them as they pulled into the drive, his eye lingering on Bethancourt's grey Jaguar, apparently comparing it not unfavorably with his own red Porsche, which was visible through the open garage doors.

"Superintendent Carmichael?" he asked as they came up on the porch. "I'll be right with you." There was an unframed painting on the table which he was carefully wrapping in newspaper. "I've got to

drop this off to be framed this morning," he said by way of explanation. He finished tying a length of twine around it and then showed them into the living room of the cottage.

"This won't take long, Mr. Blake," said Carmichael, settling himself into the offered armchair. "We'd just like an account of your movements on the day of Arthur Kerns's death."

Blake rubbed at his temple. "I didn't do much," he said. "It was my day off, so I slept in. Had some breakfast here and then puttered around the cottage. Oh, I went out for a newspaper around twelve thirty or one. That's about it. Didn't know anything was wrong until Lynn called."

"You knew she was lunching at her grandfather's?"

"Oh yes. She and Emma were going over the plans for my parents' visit." He grinned ruefully. "We were all a bit nervous about it. My parents are awfully proper, you see—Dad's a baronet—and they rather expected me to marry into a good county family. They liked Lynn well enough, but they weren't keen on Arthur and Emma's not being married. So Emma wanted to make a specially good first impression."

"You weren't in on the plans, though?"

"Oh no." He shook his head. "Besides, I knew it would be all right in the end. See, Dad's real big on art, although he's never had enough money to collect properly. And you couldn't find a bigger art buff than Arthur. And he had a Picasso. He and Dad would have gotten along fine."

There did not seem to be much more he could tell them. He had been fond of both Arthur and Emma and couldn't believe Arthur had had any enemies.

"Of course," said Carmichael to Gibbons when they were back in the car, "there is the money, and he hasn't an alibi. But he makes a good salary down at the showroom—plus commissions. And Mrs. Bradley says Arthur was free with his money, especially where Lynn was concerned."

"And," put in Gibbons, "he was counting on Arthur to make the engagement right with his parents."

Carmichael agreed. "There's not much motive there. Well, let's concentrate on Mr. Mainwaring."

Bethancourt had declined to accompany them on their quest for witnesses.

"Too much tramping around," he told Gibbons. "I'll go have a look at what's left of

Arthur Kerns's pictures and maybe get Mrs. Bradley to make me some tea. I'll be back by the time you get in and go with you to pick up Londree."

For Carmichael had decided that, the casual approach having failed, he would question Londree in an official interview room at the Cottlesdon police station.

The afternoon did not get them much further in their investigations. Bethancourt charmed and was charmed by Emma Bradley and spent a very pleasant afternoon; Carmichael and Gibbons spent a far less pleasant time but were equally fruitless.

Londree was not destined to improve their day. He was no more communicative in the police station than he had been in the pub the night before. He gave Carmichael an excellent target on which to vent the frustrations of the afternoon, but it was all the satisfaction the superintendent achieved. After half an hour, he abandoned the attempt and abruptly changed the subject.

"Perhaps," he said, "we could find another topic you would be willing to discuss with us, Mr. Londree."

"Maybe, maybe." Londree waved a hand. "All depends on your choice of subject. You cop-

pers generally want to talk about the wrong ones."

"Art," said Carmichael succinctly.

Londree's expression changed. "I'll discuss art with anybody," he said, "even the police."

"I understand you exhibited some of Mr. Kerns's paintings in your gallery. Did they sell well?"

"Not badly." Londree shrugged. "He wasn't really very good, but he had a knack for subject matter. Cosy little scenes—sort of thing everybody wants in their living rooms. Red barns in snow, that sort of thing."

"Did Mr. Kerns ever buy other paintings from you?"

"Occasionally. Not often. There was a big landscape of Dick Frams's that Emma fancied—he bought that. And several smaller pictures over the years."

"Were any of them valuable?"

"Not particularly. Dick's landscape was the most expensive—I think it was somewhere around seven hundred pounds."

Carmichael nodded and glanced in Bethancourt's direction, smiling secretively.

"Mr. Bethancourt?" he said. "I believe you had a question you wished to put to Mr. Londree?"

Bethancourt looked up, considerably startled. "Me?" he said.

"Yes, that matter you mentioned to me just before Mr. Londree came in."

"Uh, yes. Oh, of course." Bethancourt cleared his throat and glanced at Gibbons, who was smirking into his notes. He turned back to Londree, whose eyes had narrowed as if suspecting a trick. "Mr. Londree," he said, "you've been in Mr. Kerns's studio, haven't you?"

"What if I have?"

"Then you'll have seen his Picasso?"

Londree snorted. "Everyone in Biggleswade has. He was inordinately proud of it—hailed it out on every possible occasion. If you want my opinion, it's not really one of Picasso's best."

"Possibly not," conceded Bethancourt. "I saw it myself this afternoon, in the studio. It's a fake."

Whatever reaction he was expecting, it was not the broad grin that spread over Londree's face.

"You spotted that yourself, did you?" he asked.

"It's not a very good fake," said Bethancourt. "This comes as no surprise to you, I take it?"

Londree merely shrugged.

"Would you care to tell us about it?"

"That's Emma's business," said Londree. "Ask her about it if you want to know."

"You mean," Carmichael intervened, "that Mrs. Bradley knows the Picasso isn't genuine?"

"You ask her." Londree was stubborn. "She'll tell you whatever she wants you to know. It's none of my business."

Carmichael sighed. "Mr. Londree," he said, "you're a very difficult man."

The interview did not go on much longer after that. Once Londree had left, Carmichael sat silent for a moment, chewing at the end of his cigar.

"We'd better go back to Biggleswade and see Mrs. Bradley," he said at last. "I'd like to get this cleared up. Because if Londree stole the Picasso and put the forgery in its place, well, that's a powerful motive for murder if Arthur Kerns had discovered it."

"It would make a motive for Ken Mainwaring, too," said Gibbons. "He evidently paints in his off hours. I noticed one of his things in Londree's gallery this evening. He might have managed a forgery."

"Really?" said Carmichael. "That's good work, Gibbons. Well, let's get on and see what Mrs. Bradley has to say."

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Mrs. Bradley blew all their theories out of the water. She was well aware that the Picasso in the studio was a fake and asserted that Arthur had known it, too.

"He asked Nick Londree to do it for him years ago," she said. "Arthur didn't like the idea of having burglar alarms all over the place, especially as there was only one thing really worth stealing. So he had Nick make the copy, and whenever he left the studio, he'd hang that up and put the real one away."

"But he hadn't left the studio the day he died," objected Carmichael.

"Well, he didn't always do it," said Emma. "He was constantly rearranging the paintings down there—he'd many more than would fit on the walls—and he always brought the real thing out then. But unless he wanted inspiration or something, he'd leave the copy up. He said he was so used to the painting that he rarely really looked at it any more."

"I see," said Carmichael. "So you do have the genuine Picasso in your possession?"

"Oh yes," she said. "Nick brought it up to me the day after Arthur died. I'd forgotten about it, of course. Would you like me to get it?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"None at all. It's in the closet upstairs."

She rose and left the room, returning in a few moments with the duplicate of the painting in the studio. Carmichael motioned Bethancourt to study it, which he did; turning it over to look at the back as well.

"I'm no expert," he said, "but if this is a copy, it's a very much better one than the other."

That cleared up, they took their leave, much disgruntled by the entire affair.

That evening, having fetched Marla from the station and taken her to dinner at the best restaurant in Cottlesdon, they proceeded back to the pub in Biggleswade. Gibbons peered in the windows.

"He's at the bar," he reported. "Long, dark hair, Marla, wearing a worn tweed jacket and jeans. You can't miss him."

She nodded.

"Now, remember," said Bethancourt, ushering her in the direction of the door, "you don't know us. You're looking for a weekend cottage, and you're passionately interested in art. We'll follow you inside in a few minutes."

"I'm not an idiot, Phillip," she said impatiently and walked toward the door.

She looked, as she nearly always did, magnificent. Her copper-colored hair flamed against the deep green of her blazer, which was no greener than her jade eyes. Beneath it she wore a pair of skintight black leggings, outlining every inch of those incredible legs. Bethancourt wished he could witness the sensation her entrance must be making.

"Do you think Londree will actually tell her anything?" asked Gibbons.

"Probably, if she's tactful enough and doesn't make him suspicious." Bethancourt lit a cigarette.

"I should hardly think he'd be thinking about murder," said Gibbons.

"That's just it, Jack. If he can think of anything at all, he's a better man than I am. He'll say anything to keep the conversation going for the requisite period of time before seduction can take place. He might even tell her to impress her."

Gibbons glanced at his friend, who was leaning up against a car and smoking complacently. He felt an irresistible desire to tease him. "And how would you feel if she got carried away with her mission

and actually went home with him?" he asked.

Bethancourt considered. "Well," he said, "that would be awkward, but so long as she actually got the evidence . . ."

Gibbons pretended to be appalled and told his friend so in no uncertain terms.

When they entered the pub some fifteen minutes later, things seemed to be going according to plan. Marla and Londree had removed themselves to a table, where they were sitting just a little closer than was natural in two people who had only just met. Bethancourt and Gibbons settled themselves at another table some distance away where they could surreptitiously keep an eye on things. They ordered drinks and then produced various papers from Gibbons' briefcase, which they pretended to pore over. There was nothing they could really accomplish in the way of paperwork, but they thought it might be suspicious if a hardworking detective was seen to be whiling away the hours drinking aimlessly in a pub.

The first inkling they had that all was not going well was when Bethancourt met Londree at the bar an hour or so later, replenishing drinks. They nodded at each other, and

then Bethancourt said, "You're a lucky man tonight."

A sardonic smile spread over Londree's face, and he shrugged. "Not so lucky as it might appear," he answered. He looked back at Marla. "She's really something, though, isn't she?"

Bethancourt fervently agreed, but he was puzzled by Londree's first remark. He picked up his pints and returned to the table. Gibbons looked questioningly at him.

"We're in trouble," said Bethancourt.

Marla had known she was in trouble for some time. Things were just not going according to plan. At first, everything had seemed fine. The initial chatting up had taken place in the time-honored tradition of things, and she had proceeded, once firmer ground had been established, to bring up the topic of murder. It was not easy to flirt while discussing murder, but Marla was no ordinary woman and managed to give the impression that her curiosity about violent death was secondary to her desire for Londree. It was here that she felt she began to hit a snag. In response to her flattering attitude toward him, she was not receiving eager avowals of admiration in return. What she was receiving, she was sure,

was suspicion. This could not be engendered by the conversation; she had thus far avoided any but the most general comments about the murder. At one point he had regarded her quizzically and suddenly asked, "You just slumming, love, or what?"

"Sort of," she had replied, "but I don't think that's the right word to describe activities in the country."

This, of course, had taken them away from the subject of murder, and she was surprised when he reintroduced it himself. When she had asked him how he had come to hear of it, he admitted to being on the scene but to no more. In response to her tactful questions, she got nothing but a grin. And he had somehow withdrawn; there was no longer the charge of sexual tension in the air. Marla could not understand it.

Then, all at once, he drained off the last of his beer and said, "Well, goodnight, love," in a tone of great finality. Startled, she was unprepared for his next move, which was to lean over quickly and expertly and kiss her.

She raised an eyebrow as he drew back and asked, "Are you going or coming?"

He grinned at her. "It was a good try, love," he said. "In fact, it almost worked. But I know

my limitations. I'm the height of ambition for most of the local ladies, but you're as far out of my league as Princess Diana. If I'd been able to talk you into my bed, I'd have counted myself lucky. But that you should pick on me and chat me up is past belief. No one but a dolt would think I'm the man of your choice. But I'll tell you what," he added, leaning closer again, "I'll do you a deal. If you'd like to come home with me now, I'll tell you anything you want to know. I liked old Arthur and I'd like to do something about his death, but I'd chuck it all for a night with you."

Marla was sorely tempted. He was not unattractive, and she could leave afterwards and lie through her teeth to Bethancourt. It had become a matter of pride to her to obtain the desired information, and Marla had a lot of pride. Unfortunately . . .

"I see a problem there," she said, smiling. "How do I know you'll keep your end of the bargain?"

"Trust me," he suggested.

She laughed merrily. "You may not be a dolt, but neither am I," she said.

"Ta, love," he answered. "It's been my pleasure." And he was gone.

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Bethancourt was saved from further dreary police work the next day by his obligation to entertain Marla. True, she had failed her mission, but she had tried, and considering how much she loathed her boyfriend's hobby, that in itself was a good deal. At the very least, her efforts were worth a day in the country.

At the cafe in Biggleswade where they lunched, they met Londree just leaving as they were coming in. He looked startled to see them together but recovered swiftly.

"I expect last night was your idea?" he said to Bethancourt, who merely grinned and shrugged. "It wasn't at all a nice trick." He paused to look admiringly at Marla, who smiled back at him. "The offer's still good, love," he said and patted her bottom on his way out.

"Well, really," said Marla, smoothing her skirt.

All in all, it was a pleasant day, and Bethancourt was almost sorry when he put Marla on the train for London after supper. He returned to the Colton Arms, but Carmichael and Gibbons had eaten and gone out again, leaving no message. He tried the police station, but the sergeant on duty did not know where they might be.

"Well, where else should we try?" Bethancourt asked his dog, who gently wagged his tail. "I know," he said in a moment. "We'll get the car and try the pub in Biggleswade. We've spent every night there so far—I don't see why tonight should be any different."

The police Rover was not among the cars parked outside the pub, but Bethancourt, having run out of places to look, decided to have a drink anyhow. Inside, there was again a darts match in progress, but this appeared to be a mere practice session and the attendant crowd was absent. Jake Collier stood planted like a tree at the appropriate distance from the board, flicking darts expertly in its direction. Automatically, Bethancourt looked round for the exquisite Gillian and found her sitting alone at a table with a fine view of the darts board. But she was not watching her husband's prowess. Following her steady gaze, Bethancourt found himself staring at Londree, who was standing at the bar and, perversely, watching Jake Collier's performance with rapt attention. Bethancourt moved to the bar and ordered a whisky, his attention still focused on the pair.

In a few moments, Londree turned and caught Gillian's eye briefly. She nodded slightly,

and he turned away again. He drank off the rest of his beer and then quietly left the pub. Bethancourt, fascinated, turned his gaze to Gillian, who was now watching her husband's unerring progress with the darts. In a moment he had finished, to scattered applause, and went to sit with his wife. She smiled and patted his arm, and they spoke quietly together for a moment. Then he passed her a key ring and she kissed his cheek and rose to go.

Hastily, Bethancourt knocked back the rest of his whisky. He was at the window in time to see her get into a Volvo and start it up. It was too dark to determine whether there was anyone else in the car; nonetheless Bethancourt followed her out. He watched her taillights as she pulled into the road and then got into the Jaguar and quickly followed.

They drove through the village and out into the countryside along a gently winding road. Two or three miles out of the village, Gillian turned off on a dirt lane to the left, and Bethancourt felt it prudent to drive past. There was a layby not far ahead; he pulled into it and cut his engines. He let Cerberus out and nipped back to the lane on foot, with the great dog following behind.

The lane was not, as he had first surmised, a driveway, and he had a few moments of panic, thinking he had lost her. He cursed himself soundly as he trudged uphill to make certain of his stupidity, but luck had not deserted him after all. Three-quarters of a mile along the lane there was a driveway to the left with lights winking behind a screen of trees. Cautiously, Bethancourt went up the drive, holding Cerberus in check. The driveway was not long, and in a moment he could see a small, thatched cottage with lights in the windows. Before it was parked Gillian Collier's car. Bethancourt let out a sigh of relief.

Fearful of there being another animal about the place, he told Cerberus to stay and crept silently to one of the windows. There was a gap where the curtains met, and he looked in on a living room. On a long, low sofa in one corner of the room Gillian and Londree were passionately embracing.

Bethancourt's smile was very wide as he edged away from the cottage and picked his way back to where Cerberus was waiting. He patted the dog's head and leaned back against a tree, an idea glimmering in his brain. In another moment, he led the dog away.

When he returned in half an hour or so, Gillian's car was still parked before the cottage door. Fortified with a bottle of single malt scotch he had happened to have in the boot of the Jaguar and with a blanket he usually employed in a vain effort to keep the car's upholstery free from dog hair, he settled himself among the trees, some little way back from the drive. Cerberus lay down beside him, his soft eyes shining in the light from the cottage as he watched his master light a cigarette and sip from the bottle.

"Now we wait, boy," Bethancourt told him softly. "It won't be long—the pub'll close in an hour or so."

It was just about an hour before the cottage showed signs of movement. The front door opened quietly and closed again. Gillian emerged alone, got swiftly into her car, and turned it in the drive. Bethancourt drew back behind the trees so as not to be caught in the headlamps. When she had disappeared down the lane, he collected his blanket, folded it neatly over his arm, and approached the cottage. He knocked sharply on the door and then again, a little louder, when the first brought no response.

"All right," came Londree's voice. "Don't knock the bleeding door down. I'm coming."

In a moment he appeared, swinging the door open and sweeping his disheveled hair out of his eyes. He was clad in a tatty terrycloth bathrobe which he held closed with one hand while the belt dangled from its loops.

"Oh Christ," he said when he saw Bethancourt. "Don't tell me you've come to do me over because I kissed your girlfriend. I didn't even know she was your girlfriend when I did it."

Bethancourt chuckled. "Marla's kissed a great many people in her time," he said, "and I imagine she'll kiss many more. It's none of my business. No, I thought you might care for a nightcap." He brandished the bottle.

Londree, on the point of refusing, eyed the label and then abruptly stepped back to admit him. "If you like," he said, "but it's a bit late for detective work if you ask me." He looked at Cerberus. "He's not going to chase the cat, is he?"

"No," answered Bethancourt. "Cerberus, heel."

Londree closed the door behind him and surveyed his living room. "The cat's disappeared anyway," he said. "Have a seat and I'll get some glasses."

Bethancourt crossed to the sofa. The room was pleasant,

but very untidy. The glass-topped coffee table was covered with art gallery catalogues and newspapers, on top of which stood two used wine glasses. There was an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts on the end table, although Londree did not smoke. On the wall above the sofa hung what appeared to be a Turner; closer examination revealed Londree's signature. The small Monet above the mantelpiece, however, was just what it seemed.

Londree reappeared with the glasses and sat in an armchair while Bethancourt poured liberally.

"I suppose," he said, "that since you're providing the scotch, you get to pick the topic of conversation."

"That's right," said Bethancourt, handing him a glass. "Cheers."

"Ta." Londree tasted his drink and nodded. "Very good. I suppose," he continued, "your topic of choice is old Arthur's murder?"

"Obviously."

"I'm curious," said Londree. "Just why do you think I'm going to tell you anything now? Are you planning to get me drunk to loosen my tongue?"

"Not at all," replied Bethancourt, leaning back comfortably. "I think you're going to

talk to me now because if you don't, I'll talk to Jake Collier."

Londree's eyes narrowed. "Oh?" he said. "And what makes you think Jake knows anything?"

"I don't," said Bethancourt, taking out a cigarette and tapping it leisurely on the case. "However, he might be interested in some things I know."

Londree looked alarmed. "Such as?"

"Such as his wife's movements tonight."

"Oh Christ," said Londree, and took a large gulp of his drink. "You wouldn't really do something like that, would you? You wouldn't sic something that big on a scrawny chap like me?"

"I understand Mr. Collier has a rather uneven temper," mused Bethancourt. "I'm sure he'd be sorry afterwards."

Londree glared at him. "This is blackmail," he said.

"Absolutely," agreed Bethancourt. "But considering my relationship with the police, as opposed to your own, I hardly think that's pertinent, do you?"

"It wouldn't be just me, you know," said Londree persuasively, leaning forward. "He'd knock her about, too."

"Not my concern," said Bethancourt callously.

"You're not a nice man," accused Londree.

Bethancourt smiled. "It takes one to know one," he said. "Oh, by the way, I should mention that if you're planning to knock me over the head and run off, Cerberus here doesn't take kindly to people who mean me harm."

Cerberus panted happily while Londree eyed him uneasily. "He's awfully big," he said gloomily.

"One hundred fifteen pounds," said Bethancourt cheerfully. "They used them to kill wolves, you know."

Londree shuddered.

"Let me top up your drink," offered Bethancourt.

Londree held out his glass. "All right," he said gruffly. "I know when I'm beaten. At least you're not the bloody police." He sighed and sipped his drink. "I went up to Arthur's place that day to see Lynn," he began.

"Did you really?" said Bethancourt. "Tell me something, just out of curiosity. Are any of the women you go out with unattached?"

Londree chuckled. "Some of them," he answered. "Lynn was when we first started up."

"Then why is she marrying Blake?"

"Oh, ours was always an on and off kind of thing. Mostly off until the last couple of months. She must have been having

some kind of reaction to getting engaged."

Bethancourt sighed. "All right," he said. "So you went over to see Lynn."

"Yes. We knew, you see, that Emma would be gone."

"But Arthur was there," objected Bethancourt.

"He never stayed in the house when Emma was out," said Londree. "He didn't like it. He'd stay in the studio till she got back. Anyway, Lynn and I were just getting started when Emma unexpectedly turned up. I'd brought a check I owed Arthur as an excuse in case something went wrong, so I went down to the studio to give it to him. He'd rearranged all the pictures since I was there, so we spent awhile admiring them and then Arthur brought out that awful wine of his." Londree made a face. "Well, I hadn't had much sleep and no food, so the stuff went straight to my head. I think Arthur and I disgraced ourselves rather badly when we went back for tea with the girls."

"Emma mentioned it," said Bethancourt.

"I bet she did. It was her fault, anyhow, pushing me off down there alone. The upshot of it all was that I fell asleep on the couch."

"I've heard about that, too," said Bethancourt. "What I

want to hear about is when you woke up."

"I'm getting to it," growled Londree. He sipped his whisky. "It was the sirens that woke me up. I went to the window and saw them pulling into the yard. I couldn't think what had happened, so I went out. The fire brigade was driving down the lawn and the studio was blazing. I couldn't see Arthur anywhere, and that's when I realized he must still be inside. I went racing down the hill, yelling my head off, but the firemen wouldn't let me near the place. I bloodied one chap's nose pretty well, though," he added with satisfaction.

"What happened then?" asked Bethancourt.

Londree rubbed his chin. "Well," he said, "they got in pretty quickly, really. But of course it was too late. I pressed in, too, and the sight of poor Arthur—well, it nearly made me sick."

"So you didn't see anything," said Bethancourt, disappointed. "You don't know who the murderer is at all."

Londree snorted. "Of course not," he said scathingly. "Do you really think I'd be sitting on my bum around here if I knew who it was? Jesus, maybe you're not any brighter than the cops after all."

"You know something," replied Bethancourt sharply.

"Yes, something, and if you'd stop interrupting, maybe I'd get to it. Here, let me have some more of that."

Bethancourt poured.

"At first," continued Londree, "I didn't have any idea that it wasn't an accident. But then, while I was standing there in a daze, I noticed one of the pictures was gone. I had a good look around, but it wasn't anywhere. I couldn't do anything then, with the police and firemen crawling all over everything, but I went back late that night and checked Arthur's hidey-hole."

"Hidey-hole?"

"Sort of a cellar," explained Londree. "About four feet square. Arthur kept his awful wine down there and the original Picasso—" He paused. "I suppose Emma told you about that?"

"Yes, she did."

"Well, the Picasso was there, and so was this."

Londree rose and went to a corner of the room where several canvases were stacked against the wall. He selected one and returned to hold it up for Bethancourt's inspection.

It was a portrait by Sargent. Bethancourt glanced up at Londree.

"This is an original?" he asked.

Londree nodded. "Arthur brought it home a couple of years ago. Bought it in London somewhere. I've always suspected it had been stolen."

"So it has been."

Londree made an impatient gesture. "I'm not going to keep the bloody thing."

"Of course not," murmured Bethancourt, returning his gaze to the painting. "Why did you think it was stolen, then?"

"Because Arthur never showed it round much. And he would never have bought it unless he got a deal. He had enough money, but his wife didn't intend that he should spend it on paintings. She thought it was frivolous." Londree snorted in disgust. "Anyway, he spent all those years denying himself, and it stuck, even after she died and he got settled with Emma. This must have been going for a comparative song for him to be tempted. And there's only one reason for a Sargent to be going cheap."

"True enough." Bethancourt leaned back and finished off his drink. "And the missing painting, of course, was the copy you'd done of this."

Londree nodded. "So, you see, whoever has my copy is the murderer. Arthur must have

walked in on him while he was stealing it." He propped the painting against a chair and resumed his seat.

"You thought Ken Mainwaring had done it," said Bethancourt suddenly. "It was you who broke into his shop."

"Yes." Londree admitted it freely. "But he didn't have it. I went over the place with a finetooth comb."

"He might have kept it at home," said Bethancourt, but Londree shook his head.

"No, I checked there, too."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," groaned Bethancourt. "You also have an understanding with Mrs. Mainwaring?"

Londree merely grinned.

"Didn't you think it odd," continued Bethancourt, "that whoever it was didn't take the Picasso as well?"

"I did," agreed Londree, "but perhaps when Arthur walked in on him, he was so flustered he forgot. Or else—well, the Picasso copy isn't very good. I never could get Picasso down. You spotted it yourself; perhaps the murderer did, too. The Sargent was much better," he added, reaching for his glass and finishing off the whisky.

"So that's it," he said. "I've been round to some of the other artists in the area—it would mostly be them that knew Arthur had the Sargent. But I

haven't managed to find out who has the copy yet."

"No," said Bethancourt, "but I have a good idea."

Londree leaned forward eagerly. "Who?" he asked.

"Oh no." Bethancourt laughed. "You kept your counsel, now I'll keep mine. You'll know soon enough."

Londree swore, loudly and fluently, and glared at Bethancourt.

"You keep the painting for now," Bethancourt said, rising. "The police will probably want it tomorrow. Come, Cerberus."

"If you hadn't got that nasty beast with you, I'd beat it out of you."

"Very likely," admitted Bethancourt. "Well, thanks for the chat. It's been most enlightening. Oh and, Londree," he added as he opened the door.

"Yes?" asked Londree hopefully.

"You can keep the bottle."

Bethancourt walked down the lane in high spirits, whistling softly to himself. Cerberus, picking up his master's mood, trotted on ahead and disappeared into the trees that hedged the lane on either side. Bethancourt was extraordinarily pleased with himself, and although it was nearly one o'clock in the morning, he had

every intention of waking up Gibbons as soon as he got back.

In this mood of euphoria, he was not immediately alarmed when he heard footsteps behind him. In fact, it did not occur to him that it could be anyone but Londree. He had stopped and was turning when it belatedly occurred to him that Londree would surely have called out. Then he was knocked backward by a fierce blow and felt a sudden, sharp pain in his side. He managed to block the next assault by sheer good fortune, but his bid to hook his attacker's legs out from under him failed and the pain abruptly worsened in his side with the effort. There was a brief instant while both men regained their footing, and then Bethancourt reached out to stop the underhanded movement coming toward him, swinging to counter with his right. It was only as his left palm was sliced open that he realized his assailant was wielding a knife and a sudden fear rose to him. His right fist connected, but not heavily enough, and it was too dark to see where the next blow was coming from. It took him solidly in the chest, driving him back, but there was something underfoot behind him, his feet slipped, and he went over backwards. Just before his head hit the tree and consciousness re-

ceded, he heard a low growl and knew he was saved.

The assailant was too intent on his victim to notice the dog's approach. He was taken completely by surprise as the huge animal launched itself, the paws landing with tremendous force on his shoulders, smashing him to the ground, while the jaws reached for his throat. The knife was knocked from his grasp as he fell, and his cry was cut short as the teeth buried themselves in his flesh.

Cerberus paused when the man went limp beneath him. He waited a moment, holding absolutely still, then released him and turned to his master. Bethancourt lay quite still, and the smell of blood was strong. Cerberus nosed his face gently, whimpering, but the familiar voice was silent and the comforting touch did not come. He tried to rouse him by licking his cheek, but there was still no response. Then the dog stood protectively over the body and began to bark. He barked unceasingly for what seemed a very long time.

Gibbons took the bend in the road at seventy miles per hour, tires screaming in protest. He saw the entrance to the lane up ahead and ruthlessly changed down to make the

turn, skidding on the loose dirt and wrenching fiercely at the wheel to bring the car back under control. In a moment he could see the flashing light of an ambulance through the trees, and he stamped on the brakes to avoid careening into it as he came round the curve. He was out of the car in an instant, running past the ambulance, heedless of the branches and brambles in his way. He pushed past the last of them, then his heart constricted, and he, who had been trained to remain calm under any circumstances, who had never yet been truly afraid, was suddenly terrified.

In the harsh light from the ambulance headlamps he could see Bethancourt lying still and very pale on the ground with Cerberus standing over him. The dog's muzzle was stained with blood, and Bethancourt's jacket looked as if it had been soaked in it.

One of the ambulance men pushed in front of him, holding up a hand.

"Accident, sir. I'm afraid you can't get by until the police arrive—"

"I am the bloody police," snapped Gibbons, still staring at his friend. "My God, he's not dead, is he?"

"We can't tell, sir. The damned dog won't let us near."

Gibbons walked past him, and as he stepped into the light a menacing growl rose in Cerberus's throat.

"See?" said the paramedic behind him.

"Cerberus," said Gibbons, trying to keep a quiver out of his voice, to sound calm and normal, "Cerberus, it's me, Jack. You know me, don't you, boy?"

At his first words the growl ceased and the dog's ears pricked hopefully. Gibbons continued to advance steadily, holding out a hand so that the dog might pick up his scent. When he got close enough, Cerberus sniffed the hand and nudged at it.

"Good lad," said Gibbons softly, patting the dog as he sank into a crouch beside his friend and felt desperately for the pulse in the throat. It was an instant before he found it, but he was already reassured by the warmth of the skin. And the pulse was strong, if rather rapid. He breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief and beckoned to the paramedics.

"He's alive," he said and began to edge back toward Bethancourt's feet. "Come on, Cerberus. They're going to help him. It's all right, boy. Good dog." He seized the approaching paramedic's hand, drawing him closer so that the

wolfhound might see he trusted the man. Cerberus hesitated and then stepped back, allowing the men to move in. Gibbons rose and moved away a little, keeping one hand on the dog.

"He's hit his head," reported one of the paramedics in a moment. "That's why he's unconscious. The wounds aren't that bad—nothing major was hit. But he's lost a lot of blood. We'll move him now."

They brought the stretcher, and Cerberus barked sharply as they lifted Bethancourt and began to carry him to the back of the ambulance.

"Shhh, lad," said Gibbons, and tightened his hold on the dog's collar. He followed the paramedics around the vehicle, watching as they loaded his friend into the van. Then for the first time he noticed the second stretcher, already in its niche, its burden shrouded in white.

"What's that?" he asked, surprised.

"The other man," they replied. "He was dead when we arrived."

"Dead?" repeated Gibbons, puzzled.

"His throat was torn out," replied the paramedic. "The jugular was severed. Why did you think we were afraid of the dog?"

Gibbons looked in amazement down at Cerberus, who looked back at him with trusting eyes, as docile and friendly as ever.

"Good Lord," he said. Then, telling the dog to stay, he stepped into the ambulance and lifted the sheet from the dead man's face.

It was Donald Blake.

Bethancourt woke in a hospital room the next morning, feeling wretched. Someone had drawn a line of fire down his right side, his left hand throbbed painfully, and there was a spot just under his left breast that objected strenuously if he tried to move. He had a terrible headache as well. But the IV had been disconnected from his arm, and all in all he felt stronger, if miserable.

He gritted his teeth and, using his one good hand, pushed himself into a sitting position. As he did so, his eye caught sight of the silver cigarette case lying on the bedside table. It had been badly dented, and there was a deep scratch running down its center. He remembered Gibbons' saying last night that it might have saved his life and had at least prevented a nasty stab wound. Gibbons had shown him the

knife he had picked up at the scene, and Bethancourt had been suitably impressed. He grinned at himself. He had been dazed last night from anesthetic and loss of blood, and absolutely frantic to get Gibbons on the trail of Donald Blake. It had taken poor Gibbons some time to convince him that there was no need, that Blake was dead. Cerberus had defended his master far better than even Bethancourt would have believed possible.

His glasses, which Gibbons had also recovered from the scene, lay on the table beside the cigarette case. Unfortunately, the table was on his left side, and his left hand was so swathed in bandages that only his fingertips showed. He tried to reach over with his right hand but was stopped by a sharp pain from the slash along his side. He was trying to manipulate things with his left fingertips when the sister came in.

She was a slim blonde woman in her early thirties, and Bethancourt thought he recognized her from the Biggleswade pub. She handed him his glasses, ran a critical eye over him, and gave him some tablets for the pain. She was cool, efficient, and pleasant, and told him the surgeon would be in later to determine when

he might be released. She also promised to have some coffee and magazines sent to him. And then she was gone on her rounds, having solved all of Bethancourt's immediate problems inside of five minutes.

The magazines duly arrived, just after the coffee, and Bethancourt was idly flipping through them when Londree appeared. To Bethancourt's amazement, he had Cerberus with him on a lead.

The Borzoi dragged Londree to the bedside, tail waving frantically. He pushed his nose at Bethancourt and began licking his face with enthusiasm. His master received this attention with great delight.

"Hello, mate," said Londree, dropping the lead and pulling up a chair. "You don't look so bad for a chap I thought was dead last night."

"Thanks for calling the ambulance," said Bethancourt, between licks. "How did you know what had happened?"

Londree jerked a thumb at the dog. "He was setting up an awful racket. I didn't think you'd let him bark on and on like that, so I got out the car and drove down the lane to see what was up. I jumped in my skin when I saw you all. There were simply puddles of blood, with the two of you stretched out like corpses and Cerberus

here standing over you with that great bloody muzzle." He reached out and patted the dog's hindquarters fondly. "It was a sight."

Bethancourt eyed him. "You seem to like Cerberus a good deal better today than you did last night," he said.

"So I do, mate."

"Do you mind telling me why?"

"Well, he did for Arthur's murderer, didn't he? And a nasty, terrifying death it must have been, too. I don't know as I'd have been able to do any better myself." He patted the dog again, and Cerberus panted happily.

Bethancourt scratched the dog's chin. "How did you get him in here, anyway?" he asked. "I thought he was with Jack."

"Gibbons came round this morning to take the Sargent off my hands," explained Londree. "He had Cerberus with him, but the dog was poorly-like and Gibbons was worried about him. Thought he was pining after you. Well, I didn't see that the great brute should suffer after he'd done so well last night, so I told Gibbons to leave him with me and I'd see he got in to see you."

"It was awfully good of you," said Bethancourt, who was gladder to see his pet than he

would admit. "But how exactly did you persuade the hospital to let you do it?"

"Connections in high places," Londree said. "The sister on this floor—Lily, her name is—we've been having a little affair of late and, well . . ."

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt. "I should have known."

"Had to promise her a romantic dinner, though," said Londree frowning. "Which translates as expensive. Women! You nearly kill yourself to make them happy, and then the first time you want the smallest favor, they make you bleed for it."

Bethancourt was grinning. "If you can find my wallet around here, I'm sure there's a spare forty pounds in it for dinner."

"Oh no, mate," protested Londree. "I couldn't take that much off of you."

"No, really," insisted Bethancourt. "I'd be delighted to finance your supper. Truly I would."

Londree hesitated, and then a dawning suspicion rose in his eyes. "And you've got a private room and all," he murmured. "Look here, mate, are you rich or something?"

"Moderately," replied Bethancourt. "I think it'll stretch to dinner for two."

Londree grinned.

It was late evening by the time Gibbons returned. He looked tired but was clearly pleased to see his friend with some color in his cheeks.

"You gave me a bad scare last night, old man," he said, sitting down and stretching his legs gratefully.

"I'm sorry," said Bethancourt, "but I had no idea I was doing anything in the least dangerous."

"Well, it was clever of you to get that information out of Londree," Gibbons said. "By the way, he wouldn't tell me what you'd said to get him to talk."

"The better part of valor," said Bethancourt. "My lips are sealed."

"Oh, really," said Gibbons, annoyed.

"The problem with you police," said Bethancourt, "is that you're too nosy. My friend Londree told me that."

Gibbons glared at him. "Then you won't want to hear what this policeman has spent all day nosing out."

"Yes, I do," said Bethancourt contradictorily. He indicated his wounds. "I think I'm owed an explanation. Come on, Jack. I've been fretting myself into a fever all day, trying to figure it all out. Sister Lily will be upset with you if you don't stop up my curiosity."

At the mention of Sister Lily, Gibbons glanced down at Cerberus, stretched out on the floor. "I see Londree was as good as his word," he said.

"Smuggled in through the laundry entrance, I understand. But you'd better take him with you when you go."

"All right. I've got your car, by the way. I took the train up from London."

"Can you drive me back tomorrow?"

Gibbons nodded. "Carmichael said I could take time," he said. Then he paused and rubbed at his hair. "Uh, by the way, Phillip," he said, "Carmichael's furious. I had to do a lot of talking to convince him you weren't really taking risks."

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt. "Has he banned me from future investigations?"

"He was going to," said Gibbons. "He was about to ring up the chief commissioner himself and say he could no longer be responsible for civilians floundering around in his murder investigations."

"Ouch," said Bethancourt.

"I talked him out of that," continued Gibbons, "and he's calmed down some. But you had better come up with a pretty groveling apology when you get back. And you might pretend you weren't really hurt very badly."

"I wasn't," said Bethancourt stoutly. "All right, Jack. Thanks—I owe you one."

"Well, I think what we found out today rather proved to him that you could have had no idea you were in danger. And there's certainly no law preventing you from having a chat with Londree if you liked."

"Ah, yes," said Bethancourt. "What exactly did you find out?"

Gibbons sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "First of all," he said, "we went over to Blake's cottage and found Londree's copy of the Sargent. We also found three or four grams of cocaine."

"Oho . . ." said Bethancourt.

"Exactly. A man with that kind of habit needs money."

"But it doesn't explain why he attacked me. What the hell was he doing lurking about in the woods anyhow?"

Gibbons held up a hand. "All in good time," he said. "Next, we went over to his parents' house. They recognized the Sargent as one that had been stolen from them two and a half years ago, while their son was still living in London. He moved down here a few months later."

"I see," said Bethancourt. "Londree said Arthur had rearranged his paintings recently. Blake must have gotten

the shock of his life when he saw the portrait. And his father was due to come and natter on about art with Arthur in a few days. He had to get it out of there."

"We can only guess what happened," said Gibbons. "Blake knew Lynn was due there for lunch—he must have counted on that being a time when Arthur would be absent from the studio. He must have been unsure what time lunch was to be, and arrived early."

"And found Lynn's car parked in the drive," put in Bethancourt. "He didn't know she'd gone off with Emma and assumed lunch was in progress. So he nipped down to the studio."

"I think," continued Gibbons, "Arthur must have stepped out, or gone down to his cellar. He must have returned and actually caught Blake making off with the painting. At which point Blake bopped him one and then, presumably, started the fire to cover up his handiwork."

"It would be charitable," said Bethancourt, "to assume he thought he'd already killed Kerns when he started the fire."

"It would be charitable," said Gibbons grimly, "but I doubt it would be true."

"Anyway," said Bethancourt, "he must have heard that Londree was on the scene—why did he wait until last night to do anything about it?"

"Because Londree clearly didn't know who had done it. Otherwise, he'd have come after Blake," Gibbons sighed. "We went all over London," he said. "Blake's friends there confirmed that he was a cocaine addict. Evidently he had some idea of quitting, which is why he moved up here, but it didn't take. We also learned from his parents that he didn't show up there till dinnertime the other day. It took us all day, but we finally tracked down the antique dealer he went to that afternoon."

"He tried to sell Londree's fake?"

Gibbons nodded. "The antique dealer said Blake seemed truly astonished to find out it was a copy."

"That explains it," said Bethancourt. "He must have realized at once that only Londree could have painted it. And that he was certain to miss it."

"Blake had at least to find out what Londree knew. He didn't get back from his parents' until yesterday afternoon. He evidently assumed Londree would be at the pub until closing and went round to his house after that—only to find Lon-

dree hand in glove with a man in the confidence of the police—namely you. He may even have seen Londree showing you the portrait, and he knew you had seen the copy in his possession. I'm afraid if it hadn't been for Cerberus, both you and Londree would be dead."

"Nonsense," said Bethancourt briskly. "I admit I probably would have been ass enough to succumb, but not Londree. You forgot what a vicious fighter he is. He would have gotten the better of Blake, knife or no."

"Perhaps," said Gibbons, grinning, "but I would have hated to have you dead. How did he get the better of you, anyhow? He wasn't a very big man, and you used to be quite a nasty fighter yourself at Oxford."

Bethancourt shrugged. "He was on me before I even knew he was there," he replied. "I wasn't being in the least cautious; in fact, I believe I was whistling. And exactly how do you know what kind of fighter I was at Oxford? I don't remember fighting with you."

"There was that chap at New College who took a dislike to you," Gibbons reminded him.

Bethancourt smiled ruefully. "I'd forgotten about that," he said. "But you weren't there that night."

"No, but I heard about it. And I saw the New College man the next day."

"Ah, well," said Bethancourt, "if Blake had been drunk and had begun shouting insults at me from fifty yards' distance, I might have got the better of him, too. As it is, we must be grateful to Cerberus."

"Yes, and I had better get him out of here," said Gibbons, stretching. "I'm sorry, Phillip, but I'm all in. I'll come round for you in the morning."

"All right," said Bethancourt. "Thanks, Jack."

Gibbons sketched brief salute in reply and led Cerberus from the room. In a moment or two, Bethancourt heard voices down the hall: the challenging female voice of the night duty nurse and the weary voice of Gibbons. Apparently he had forgotten that the dog's presence would be a problem.

Bethancourt was very tired himself. He swallowed the tablets they had left for him and cautiously slid his battered body down in the bed, fixing the pillow comfortably under his head.

"Well, I'm taking him out now, for God's sake," came Gibbons' voice. There was the sound of footsteps, and then all was quiet. Bethancourt fell asleep.

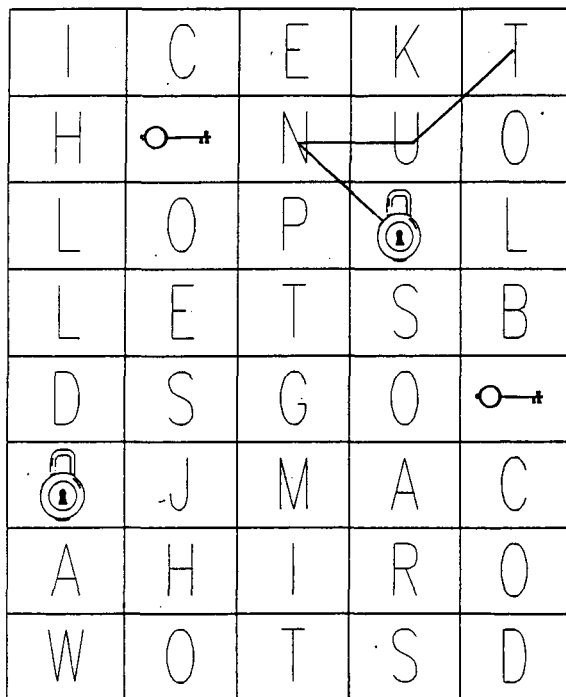
UNSOLVED

by
Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

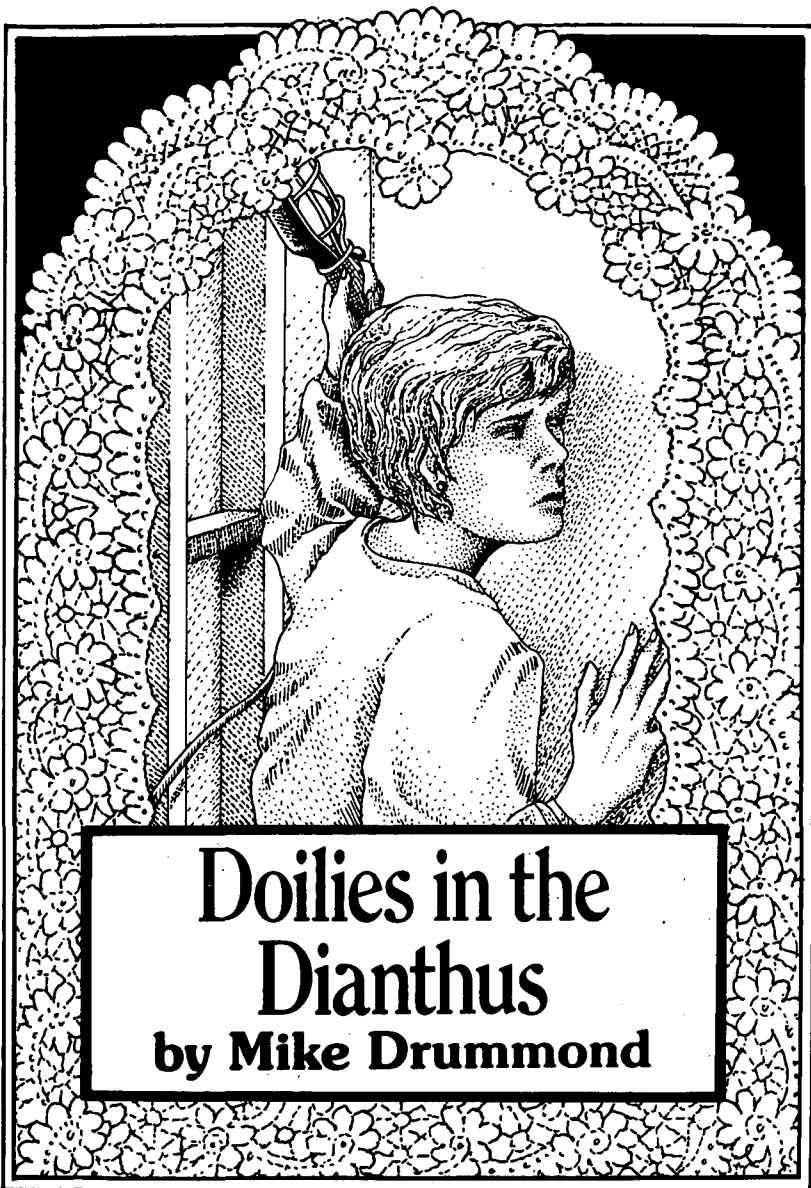
The answer will appear in the June issue.

In the grid below are a number of compound words that begin with either "key" or "lock." Words stem from the key or lock images in any direction, and letters may be used more than once. "Locknut" is provided as an example. After you have found all the compound words, the ten letters left unused will reveal, when unscrambled, the name of a well-known character guilty of breaking and entering.



See page 149 for the solution to the April puzzle.

FICTION



Doilies in the Dianthus

by Mike Drummond

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The cool April day was clear and bright, the earth still damp from the previous week's rain. The pleasant time-warp spell spun by the quaint Victorians on the sycamore-lined lane was harshly broken by the monstrous green dumpster hunkered near Aunt Morna's verandah. It had been twenty years since I'd returned home. The trees were bigger and the houses seemed smaller and a little more shabby than I remembered, but nothing else had changed.

Aunt Morna's place was certainly in an advanced state of decay. The iron gate leading to the front door creaked from lack of use. Only guests used the front entrance, family always went around back through the kitchen. I was a visitor now. I used the gate and threaded my way up the path through construction debris: old lathe and plaster, bits of carpeting. Fragments of familiar wallpaper fluttered about in the breeze. From my small, sad childhood bedroom, or another room? It had been so long, I couldn't recall.

Only Aunt Morna's garden remained as I remembered. The high-walled side yard bristled with red-stemmed rosebushes full of spring promise, lush beds of bearded iris about to bloom above the drooping remains of last month's jonquil crop, and, of course, carnations. Morna loved carnations in all their incarnations and variations. I'd known the names once, years ago: carnelians, cottage pinks, dianthus—so many more.

But even here small changes were evident. Scraps of paper stuck to bushes. Tiny weeds sprouted boldly in the beds—they'd never have dared do that if Morna was around. Compulsively, I gathered up the paper scraps and stooped to pull out a particularly brazen weed. Aunt Morna would have approved; I almost thought I heard her voice. But of course Aunt Morna wasn't around now. She wasn't in the hospital, although at eighty-eight, overweight and arthritic, with all the mobility of a rock, she might have been. And she wasn't dead as far as anyone knew. In fact, no one knew much about Aunt Morna these days, and that was why I was back in Del Oro after half a lifetime. Aunt Morna simply wasn't—she'd disappeared.

Dolfie answered the door the third time I knocked. She flashed a sneer of recognition. It was her trademark wolfish display of stained incisors and cold, dark eyes. The expression on her face told me that nothing had mellowed between us in the intervening years.

"I'm eating," she barked, and wiped her mouth with the back of her bandaged hand.

Gnawing on a bone, no doubt, I thought, but I didn't say so. She turned on her heel and I followed her silently down the crooked hall to the kitchen.

"Not enough here for you," she said, fussing at the stove.

"I had a sandwich on the bus."

"What? No sushi and caviar?"

"I'm a vegetarian now, Dolfie."

"Plenty to graze on in the garden patch."

"It's safe to say you didn't injure your hand pulling weeds," I said. "The flowerbeds haven't been tended in some time."

"Not by you, anyway, Miss L.A. bigshot. Don't come in here telling me my business."

Dolfie's warm familial qualities—petty jealousy and sarcasm—underscored two of the many reasons why I'd left home in the first place. But returning her remarks "in kind" wouldn't get me any closer to Aunt Morna, so I bit my tongue.

"Look, Dolfie," I said coolly, "I'm here because I care about Morna. I want to help."

"Help yourself to the house, you mean. I'm the one that stayed and kept it up all these years. Where were you? By rights it's mine."

"The house is still Morna's as far as I know. I have no interest in it."

"Hmph," she growled, and scooted around in her chair until her back was toward me.

I wanted to scream, but all I said was, "Really, Dolfie. I'll speak with you later."

I stormed out of the kitchen the way I'd entered and didn't stop until I found myself alone in the dark entry hall. To the right, the parlor door was ajar. The room seemed brighter than I remembered—far too much sunlight to have leaked through the tall, heavily draped, and tightly shuttered windows. As I pushed, the door scraped against the debris on the floor. A ragged, gaping hole in the ceiling plaster exposed rotting timbers and gave a clear view up to my old room. Above that, another larger hole led to the attic and, through a scattering of loose shingles, to the sky.

In spite of the fresh air, there was a musty smell, and brown rainwater stains appeared like abstract designs on the faded floral wallpaper. Morna's prized Oriental rug was bunched in a corner

and still damp to the touch. I didn't bother to open any of the old photo albums or books from the shelves that lined the wall. I didn't want to know. Dolfie had been less than no help to Aunt Morna, wherever she was. The place was hopeless, almost beyond repair.

Even so, I smiled when I saw the electronic jumble against the other wall. It was a collection only a video historian or a confirmed packrat could appreciate. Morna loved her television. She'd had sets in the house as long as I could remember and maybe before. I'd come to live with Aunt Morna as a toddler back in '49, and that set was still there. It hadn't worked since Howdy Doody was first run, but the cabinet was still a fine, and very heavy, piece of furniture, although hardly Victorian. Its huge flat top made a nice base for the collection of portable TVs that she wore out regularly over the decades. A video archaeologist could dig down through the outer layer of sets, going back in time the farther down he dug. Many sets still had their rabbit ears extended to pick up the faint San Francisco signals to the west, but of course, none had been plugged in for years.

I wondered where the hand-held model was, the one I'd sent to Morna last Christmas. She'd called to thank me. A long distance call was the height of extravagance for Morna. I'd been worried that the screen was too small for her old eyes, and as it turned out it was.

"But that's okay, darling," Morna had crooned. "It's small enough to carry around in my apron pocket, that's the important thing. And I only tune in the old movie channel anyway. I've got those images locked in here with me."

I could almost see Morna tapping her blue-tinted bangs with her ring finger, the way she always did.

"Oh, I watch the new movies, too," she said, "but who needs to see all that sweaty flesh? And Madonna—really, now. I just listen to the dialogue, and imagine a nice Hayes Office version." Then slipping into a perfect Schwarzenegger impression. "Vin aw you comin home?"

"All be bock," I growled Teutonically.

We laughed a lot that day on the phone, but I didn't come back, as much as I loved her. Tiny Del Oro, nestled in the Sierra foothills, was where I was from, not where I belonged. Los Angeles, for all its smog and traffic problems, was home. I'd become a new person, my own person, and I didn't want to live among constant reminders

of my past. Most of all, I didn't want to live anywhere near my cousin Dolfie.

She was six years older than I. We'd grown up together in that old house, both taken in under Morna's protective wing. But while my parents had been killed in an auto accident, Dolfie's mother—Morna's little "baby" sister Eva—had simply abandoned the two-month-old child and disappeared somewhere over the mountains into Reno. No father was named on the birth certificate. No one ever came to collect her. No one had seen Eva since. I'd never even seen a picture of her, as Morna had clipped her face and figure from the family photos long ago.

Dolfie was short for Adolpha. It was hard to believe that anyone would name a kid that during World War II. Hitler ruined a perfectly good first name. Back in those pre-self-esteem/politically-correct days when both children and adults teased Dolfie about her name, Aunt Morna pointed out many times that Adolpha means "noble wolf" and she should be proud. It was an odd name for a girl, perhaps, but as I've mentioned, Dolfie grew to look like one—a wolf, anyway, hardly noble. And, unfortunately, she was unlike her natural mother. Dolfie never disappeared, that's for sure. She was always present and disagreeable. Always.

I glanced around the room again, looking for some object that would draw my mind away from the bitterness I felt, but there was nothing, nothing but silence. Then I heard it. A sound, overhead. I looked up in time to sidestep as the object clattered through the boards, swooshed past me, and crashed to the floor.

"Dangity dang!" said a familiar voice from the past.

"Is that you, Barger?" I called out.

"Who wants to know?"

Barger's near-toothless head looked down on me from the attic hole. "Hey, whaddaya know, Sport?"

Barger called almost everyone Sport, but said the word differently, depending on which "Sport" he was addressing. If I listened closely, I could still make out the subtle vocal shading that he had always reserved for me. I heard scraping and crashing overhead and then his footsteps on the stairs.

Like everything else in Del Oro, Barger was smaller, older, and shabbier than I remembered, but very glad to see me. In spite of his grimy overalls, he gave me a bear hug I couldn't escape.

"Good ta see ya, Sport," he said in his too-loud voice. "Things is a bit of a mess right now, but we'll have 'em fixed new in no time."

I shuddered to think of the end result. Although Barger looked like a handyman, and was certainly industrious and well-intentioned, he never got much done. I could never figure why Morna kept him around unless it had to do with Christian charity, or maybe pity. Half-deaf Barger was "a shellshock," as Morna used to explain. Today the doctors would call it posttraumatic stress syndrome, but back in the forties when Barger returned home to Del Oro from the big war, he became the town freak, or at least one of them. The story goes that Barger left town a goodlooking, budding architect and returned like a building had collapsed on him. Like Aunt Morna's house was about to do.

"Come on up, Sport. I'll show ya the ropes," he said, gesturing toward the winding stairs. "We're renovatin' this joint from the top down."

Top down . . . convertibles . . . sunny summer days. The faded wallpaper brought back memories as I ascended. Painful teenage memories, of dances missed, and proms not attended, and the cruel laughter of the in crowd—who I sincerely hoped had gotten fat and lost their hair and their half-formed dreams. I got as far as the second level landing, Barger breathing hard by my side. Hand tools were arrayed on every available bit of floor space, which made walking a challenge. When I peered past the doorway and down through the floor of what had once been my bedroom, I heard distant voices and laughter.

My knees got weak. Heights? Fear of the past? Vertigo? Whatever it is, I can't look straight down from anything taller than a footstool without losing my balance. Barger was already on the steps leading to the attic.

"Up here, Sport! The view's fantastic! You can see all the way to the graveyard."

As enticing as that sounded, there was no way I could follow. Gaping holes dotting the ceiling plaster above my head held no promise of a firmer footing up where Barger stood. Clutching the handrail, I eased my way down to the foyer.

Every step reminded me of that terrifying time in L.A. I was working in a view office on the thirty-eighth floor of the Union Bank building on Figueroa. I'd gone in at dawn. When the quake hit a few minutes later, the building whipped the top floors several feet in either direction. My desk slid and pinned me in my chair against the wall. The lights flickered out all over town, and I was

alone in the darkness. There was no one on the floor to help me at that hour.

I worked my way free and got out to the elevators. They weren't working. After a long, rolling aftershock, I fairly sailed down thirty-eight flights of stairs, overshooting the emergency exit. I was two stories below street level before I got a grip on myself. I know it's foolish, but I've never worked or lived above the ground floor since.

The only ground floor room Dolfie had to spare, besides the waterlogged parlor with no ceiling, was Morna's. When Morna had grown too old and feeble to climb the stairs, she'd had the servants' quarters off the kitchen converted into a bedroom suite. And all that doily-covered overstuffed furniture was Morna's.

When we were kids, Morna tried to teach Dolfie and me how to make doilies. Neither of us had the patience. The closest I came was using the paper kind on the greeting cards I made for her on holidays. She cherished them all, gushed about every one, and kept them in a scrapbook somewhere. It was her encouragement that got me interested in design. Doilies. I knew I couldn't sleep in a room filled with them not knowing what had happened to Morna.

I walked the few blocks to Flume Street and booked a room at the Triangle Hotel. It was directly off the hallway that led to the public bar, but the increase in noise was more bearable than a ride up to quieter rooms in the open cage they called an elevator.

The decor in my dim room was a sort of Jimi Hendrix-meets-Queen-Victoria-meets-Mr. Tacky: a waterbed undulated beneath a heavy, canopied four-poster, a gilt-framed print of one of those sad waifs with the big brown eyes covered a crack in the wall above an antique commode. I washed my hands and dried them on a threadbare purple towel, adjusted my makeup, and headed out the door.

My first stop was at the Vato County sheriff's office. After a brief wait in the plain, tiled cube they called a lobby, the face behind the bulletproof glass gestured for me to go through the inner door. A khaki-covered Gus Wyler met me in the hall and extended one of his catcher's mitt-sized paws toward me by way of greeting. I could see him giving me the once-over, and I wondered how much I'd changed in his eyes. I like to think that I've finally "bloomed" in middle age.

Gus had worn another uniform back at Del Oro Union High: bluejeans and a letterman's jacket no matter what the temperature, his hair long, swept back in a greasy duck's butt, and a smoke between his lips. His scarred lips.

The scar was barely visible now beneath the salt-and-pepper mustache. I cut my eyes away when I realized he saw me looking. He looked away, too. In the old days he'd gotten in lots of fights over that harelip. Stupid fights. Some with strangers who stared too hard, others with locals who mocked his speech. Few people made the same mistake twice, however. And yet, away from the other boys, when he made deliveries around town in his old truck, he could be quiet, shy, polite, and gentle.

The wooden chair creaked beneath his bulk. He'd put on weight over the years, and his hair was burr-cut now, shot with grey.

We are all getting older, I thought.

"You're here about Morna, of course," Gus said.

I nodded.

"Weird case," he continued. "Gives me a funny feeling, you know? Everything checks out, the Reno bus and all, but nothing fits. The evidence says she vanished, but I don't know."

"That's why I'm here."

Gus Wyler reviewed the case much as he had earlier when I'd telephoned from L.A. Dolfie dropped Morna at the bus depot in time to catch the daily FunRun Bus to Reno. The bus was one of those casino-sponsored discount affairs designed to separate retirees from their pension checks in exchange for bus fare and a few free-play coupons. The one that passed through Del Oro originated in Sacramento and was usually near capacity by the time it hit the foothills. According to the bus company records and the local station operator, only one person boarded the bus in Del Oro that day. They don't log passenger names, but the general description from the terminal attendant here in town seemed to fit Morna.

"The driver wasn't much help," Gus said. "He claims all the old ladies look alike to him and he doesn't even notice them unless they get stuck in the john, die in their seat, or leave him a big tip on the return trip."

"Morna liked to play the slots every so often, but she could barely walk."

"Neither can half of the other passengers, according to the driver. Morna would have been just another old lady to help up the stairs. Once he dumped her in her seat she would have just

blended into the sea of blue-grey heads bobbing in the coach."

"And she didn't make the return trip that evening?" I asked.

"Apparently not. According to the driver, he was three light on the return, and no one got off in Del Oro. But that happens, people hit a jackpot or get carried away pulling levers on one-armed bandits and time slips away. Company policy is to wait fifteen minutes past departure time and then pull out. They may have a couple of irate people stranded in Reno overnight, but I guess they figure it beats having forty-eight irate passengers complaining all the way home to their prune juice.

"Even your cousin Dolfie didn't seem too worried. She didn't come see me until late the next day."

"That figures. And the Reno police?"

"Nothing. Nothing at the casino where she was dropped, nothing at the hospitals or emergency rooms, and nothing," he added, lowering his voice, "at the morgue."

The Del Oro bus depot was like a morgue, cold and uninviting. A glass counter was filled with model kits of plastic aircraft carriers and fighter planes. A thin layer of dust covered everything. Everything except the pimply-faced boy slouched behind the counter memorizing the contents of a dog-eared magazine. When I entered, he raised his insolent head slowly and gave me a dismissive once-over. He didn't bother to close the magazine. It was filled with photos of unusually uninhibited and very top-heavy young women.

"I'm studying to be a gynecologist," he smirked.

"I bet all the girls just can't wait," I said.

That got me a frown.

"It's two hours until the next bus to Sac," he said, pointing to the schedule on the wall. "Tomorrow morning for Reno."

"It's Reno I'm interested in," I said; "but not tomorrow, last week. It's about my aunt, the one who disappeared."

"Oh yeah, the old lady. Well, she left here in one piece. I told the sheriff that."

"So you remember her?"

"Not really. All you old ladies kinda look alike."

"All us old ladies? My Aunt Morna is almost twice as old as me. Why I'm hardly old enough—perish the thought—to be your mother."

"Really? Could have fooled me."

The kid looked serious.

"Really," I said.

There'd better be a few charm classes in your gynecology school, I thought, or your stirrups will be forever empty.

The sad state of Morna's once-charming house had me wondering about her finances. I'd never pried into them before, never had a reason to. Morna didn't work outside the home when I was growing up and had relied on a small but steady income from what she called her nest egg. Creighton Boxer would know the details. His office was in the Del Oro Trust & Savings building, down the street from the hotel.

Creighton's bald head gleamed under the fluorescent lights, providing stiff competition to the sparkling Rolex that peeked from beneath an immaculate French cuff. Like most lawyers, Creighton Boxer's chief interest was treating himself well. He did an excellent job. Rumor had it that he had his suits tailored in New York, but now that he was developing a late middle-aged paunch, it hardly mattered.

Boxer rose as I entered and welcomed me warmly. Far too warmly for someone who wasn't a well-heeled real estate developer—his usual clientele.

"Where has Morna gotten herself?" he asked earnestly, a mechanically warm smile on his lips.

"Where indeed."

We stared at each other until the smile faded.

"Your cousin Adolpha has already tried," he said.

"Tried what?"

"I won't breach client confidence, you know."

"And I wouldn't expect you to."

Boxer smiled again.

"At least you're being more civil about this than Adolpha was," he said. "I almost had to call for Sheriff Wyler."

"What did she want to know?"

"Why, exactly what I'm sure you want to know. And since neither of you is a client, I see no reason why I can't discuss the issue. I believe the question would be phrased something like, who is named as beneficiary of dear Aunt Morna's estate?"

"And the answer is?"

"A private matter at the moment. Wills are subject to probate in this state. You'll find out at the appropriate time."

"Which could be years, if her . . ."

"If her body isn't found?" Creighton said cheerfully. "Quite right. Does that bother you?"

"What bothers me is that no one can find a little old half-blind lady who can't move more than five paces without assistance. That's what bothers me."

"Hmmm."

"Had Morna made any changes to her will recently?" I asked.

Boxer eyed me as he calculated his reply. I was no greedy relative waiting to gorge on an inheritance, but could he tell that? Lawyers are, as a class, the world's great cynics.

"I'll give you the same answer I gave to Adolpha. I haven't seen Morna on anything other than a social basis for years."

"In other words, no?"

"That would be my interpretation."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

Boxer acted wounded.

"Why not?" he pouted.

Dolfie was padlocking the cellar doors that were buried beneath the drooping blue hydrangea in the side yard. When she heard my steps on the gravel, she whirled around, wide-eyed. It was a look I'd seen often as a girl, and it was even more frightening now that Dolfie was in middle age.

"You were always the snoop," she hissed as she jammed the huge ring of keys into her sweater pocket.

"Is Morna down there?" I asked lightly. Gus—Sheriff Wyler—had told me he combed the house the day after Morna was reported missing. The cellar floor had been covered with several inches of water. The old sump pump never had worked right, as I recalled.

"You think that, do you? *Things* are down there all right, but dear Aunt Morna isn't one of them. You don't know."

"Now, girls," I imagined Morna saying. She said it so often as we were growing up. But the voice in my mind's ear was faint and distant as if borne from afar on the wind.

For a moment it looked as if Dolfie heard it, too, but she barged past me and disappeared around back, no doubt heading for the kitchen. The only other entrance to the now-mysterious cellar was through the pantry closet off the kitchen. When the door on the screen porch slammed, I went over to the hydrangea. The heavy

iron doors were rusted beneath layers of paint, and the hasp was held shut by a shining new padlock.

My dear, I said to myself, you can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose, but you've certainly never picked a lock.

But I did want to see what was down there besides the furnace. Dolfie was right in that regard, I was a bit of a snoop. As I gazed at the lock, I recalled a scene at the spa where I'd once attempted aerobics. Our instructor, a tiny ninety-pound dynamo with an entirely too perfect body, had sheared a frozen padlock from one of the other girls' lockers, and she'd done it without flexing a biceps. The trick had been in this bulky pliers-type arrangement, a bolt snapper or something, she called it.

It wasn't the sort of thing I'd packed for the trip, and if I purchased one from Mace's Hardware, it would be bound to raise an eyebrow.

But there was one other place.

Dolfie was busy crashing around in the kitchen, slamming pots and pans, and generally acting the fool. I crept upstairs to the second floor landing where Barger's tools still lay scattered. As long as I stayed focused on the task at hand, my fear of heights stayed in check. High overhead, I heard Barger's happy, toneless whistle as he noisily hammered something into place.

What luck! Barger's tool selection included the usual array of hammers, screwdrivers, and saws, as well as a number of devices whose utility was unknown to me . . . and a red-handled set of cutters, perfect for shearing off padlocks.

Dolfie was still in her kitchen as I slipped out the front door and hurried to the side yard. The lock didn't come off as quickly as I'd hoped, but soon I was easing the iron doors open. The damp, sour breath of the cellar assailed my nostrils. I'd never liked it down there. It was a close, dark space with little natural light. I bumped my head smartly on an overhead beam as I descended.

On the far side of the room, halfway up the wall, I could make out a slit of light bleeding under the pantry door that Dolfie guarded. A bare light bulb used to hang near the furnace, but in the gloom I couldn't find it. Puddles of water stood in random patches on the floor. The ceiling beams seemed lower than I remembered, and the cement floor was lumpy and irregular. Something squished beneath my feet, and when I jumped aside, I lost my balance and tumbled painfully to the floor. Barger's bolt cutters clattered loudly

in the empty room. My hip and ribs were bruised by protrusions in the cement, and my hand rested on something spongy anchored to the floor. A shoe? But I didn't have time to think. The pantry door crashed open, and Dolfie's form stood silhouetted at the top of the stairs, a butcher knife in her hand.

"I know you're down here, damn you!" she yelled.

While she didn't see me in the gloom, the shaft of light from the iron doors in the side yard told her I was there. With the added light from the pantry door I was able to make out the object in my hand. It was a shoe, an old lady's shoe, one of Morna's protruding from the roughly spread concrete. I screamed.

Dolfie fumbled for the light switch, and the cellar was illuminated.

"You meddlesome fool," she said. "You should have stayed in Los Angeles."

The entire floor was a surreal sea of concrete swirls and eddies, like a crazy patchwork quilt. The shoe in my hand was worn and cracked, and other things protruded here and there: a pan handle, bits of broken crockery.

I struggled to my feet. It wasn't easy on the uneven ground. No wonder the ceiling had seemed so low. The floor, except near the furnace, was two feet higher than it had been.

"You think Aunt Morna is down here, don't you?" Dolfie said. "Under the concrete. Why don't you steal a pickaxe from Barger and try to find out? Go on. You'll never find her. Not that you have the time."

"Dolfie, this is serious. What's going on down here?"

"As if you care."

"Of course I care."

"About the inheritance," she screamed. "It belongs to me, I live here, you don't!"

Dolfie raised the knife menacingly and started down the stairs toward me. In her haste she forgot about the low floor beam that straddled the stairwell. Her forehead hit it with a sickening bonk. The knife clattered harmlessly to the floor. Dolfie collapsed in a heap at the base of the stairs, her leg twisted at an unnatural angle.

I was wary as I approached her, but she was out cold. A thin rivulet of blood trickled from her nose. I gathered up the knife and anything else that could be used as a weapon and went up to the kitchen phone and dialed 911 for an ambulance.

One of Gus Wyler's deputies arrived with the ambulance and kept his lights flashing and his squad car radio on full blast the whole time he was there. So much for Aunt Morna's quiet Victorian neighborhood.

Barger had helped me carry Dolfie into the kitchen before they arrived. I didn't mention anything about the knife or Dolfie's threats, or the suspicious cellar floor. As nutty as she was, she was still family . . . and in great pain. Compound fracture of her thighbone, concussion, and lots of bruises, according to the attendant. She cursed a blue streak as they loaded her into the ambulance for the ride to Del Oro Memorial. Barger cheerfully waved goodbye to her as if she was taking the bus to summer camp.

When the deputy left and Barger toddled off home, I finally had the place to myself. As I stared at the dilapidated facade, I felt a tingle of anticipation mixed with fear of what I might find.

Using a pry bar from Barger's tool hoard, I broke through the thin cement veneer on the cellar floor, half-expecting to find Morna's remains. What I found was garbage, lots of it. Dolfie had cemented over bags of household garbage. I tried another spot, and then another and another. Soon the lumpy floor looked like the crumbled crust of a demented chef's pie. And each time the payoff was the same: moldy garbage inexpertly sealed in a lumpy mound on the cellar floor. I vaguely remembered back a year, to when Morna complained about government bureaucracy and a rise in garbage collection rates. The smell in the cellar was overpowering, but it was a vegetable smell. No Aunt Morna.

Night was falling as I paused in the garden to catch my breath. A patch of white flickered nearby among the flowers. It hadn't been there earlier. When I moved closer, I recognized the shape. It was a paper doily. I turned it over in my hands. The pattern was as intricate and symmetrical as any snowflake. One side was yellowed with age and the other was garishly colored with crayons wielded by a childish hand. Like those I'd done for Morna so many years before.

Once again I imagined I heard her gentle laugh. And maybe I did, thin and high-pitched, overhead. Perhaps a neighbor's television set was on. I crossed the garden and stood by the fence listening. Nothing. And then, when I glanced back at the house, another white patch caught my eye. It hung from the scalloped siding of the turret just under the witch's hat roof near the attic. Was Morna up there? Someone had placed that doily on the wall,

and recently. But how? It was twenty feet from the ground, straight up. And why?

I hurried into the house and up the stairs to the landing before the old fears began to dampen the curiosity that had propelled me that far. In the gloom the holes in the flooring were less evident, and the hallway light switch wasn't working. But there was noise up there, and it wasn't the wind. It was voices and laughter, low and muted to be sure, but it was there.

Barger's utility light was coiled at my feet. It was one of those with a long orange cord and a light bulb in a little wire cage at the end. I plugged it in and fumbled around until I figured out how the switch worked. Then I slowly made my way up the creaking stairs to the attic level, testing each step thoroughly before I stood on it. Although it was cool, I was perspiring slightly by the time I made the upper landing.

In the distance, through a gaping hole in the wall, I could see the chalky tombstones in the tiny cemetery that surrounded Saint Oona's. Loose boards lay across the large holes that dotted the floor. Two of the walls on the far side were covered with fresh gypsum board, drywall, I believe it's called. And some of Barger's tools were scattered nearby.

The doily I'd seen had been snagged to the siding somewhere on the other side of that fresh drywall. I needed a closer look. As I moved forward, my light cord snagged, and when I gave it a tug, it pulled free from the wall and plunged me into darkness.

Instinctively I fell to my knees, more out of self-preservation than from any innate desire to pray. I had seen wall outlets as I scanned the room, but where were they? I gathered the orange cord under one arm and crawled along on all fours, testing the floor for unseen holes, and the wall for electrical outlets. I heard scurrying sounds and, of course, my own heart pounding.

After gouging my hand with slivers from the exposed timbers, I located an outlet halfway around the room, and mercifully it worked. I sat on the floor with my back to the wall and rested.

A tiny muffled voice began laughing from beyond the drywall. I was going nuts . . . as nuts as Dolfie. Or was I? I inched my way toward the new wall, skirting the holes and paying out the extension cord, careful not to tug it loose from the outlet. When I placed my ear to the wall, the sounds of laughter increased. There was a whole crowd of people on the other side of that wall. When they got done laughing, a male voice began talking about headache

remedies and, sure enough, there was Aunt Morna's tiny voice heckling him, just as she had always done during commercials.

I picked up a scrap of wood and banged it on the wall a few times and then listened again.

"Barger, you deaf old goat," the tiny voice said, rapping lightly on the wall, "why are you working at this time of night? Go home and let me listen to my television in peace."

"It's me, Aunt Morna!" I yelled, pounding on the wall. "It's me."

"Thank God," she said. "I was almost out of doilies."

It took some doing, but I got a mallet from Barger's tool supply and pounded my way through the wall. There were four thicknesses of drywall where one would have sufficed. I was covered with chalky gypsum dust from head to toe, and so was Morna when I finally broke through. She looked like a ghost.

"I've lost more tonnage than Oprah," she exclaimed from behind her powdery mask. "Is there any junk food in the house? It's hell watching all those commercials on an empty stomach."

For a week she'd been sealed in a space no bigger than a bathroom with only a chair, her pocket TV, and a steamer trunk filled with my childhood memorabilia. Fresh air came through the cracks in the wall, and rain water dripping through the roof and caught in old flowerpots provided for her drinking needs. Her only food had been two jars of library paste, the kind I'd used to stick my paper doilies to bright bits of construction paper.

"Why the heck do kids eat that stuff voluntarily?" she asked. Her voice, never loud, was barely audible.

But her week-long fast had helped her lose her butterball shape, and her arthritis had regressed to merely annoying levels. Except for a few wrinkles, which all of us seem to acquire over time, she looked like the Aunt Morna I'd known twenty years before.

Morna smiled a sly smile. "And if Dolfie thinks she's inheriting, she's got another think coming."

Gus Wyler arrived first. He bulled his way through the loose plaster and carried Morna down to the waiting ambulance—the second one in a single night on that quiet Victorian street. Morna squirmed the whole way down. She had more energy than I'd seen her display in years. Gus finally put her down, and she kicked at him. When he bent down to grab his shin, she gave him a peck on the cheek before marching under her own power to the ambulance.

She insisted on riding up front with the driver. They headed for the hospital with sirens blaring. The neighbors would have plenty to talk about that week.

And so would Morna and eventually Dolfie.

Apparently Morna had threatened to cut Dolfie out of the will once too often, and Dolfie snapped. She concocted a plan to make her troublesome aunt disappear. She sealed Morna behind a layer of drywall and counted on the deaf Barger to be oblivious to any of Morna's cries for help. She figured if the body was ever found, it could be blamed on Barger, a shellshock who couldn't be held responsible.

Then, to draw suspicion further away, she wore one of Morna's hats and a floral print dress when she boarded the bus to Reno. No wonder the boy gynecologist at the bus terminal thought the "old" woman was my age—she was. After that it was a simple matter for Dolfie to return from Reno on another bus wearing her own clothes.

Which is something she won't be doing for a while. Dolfie's under observation in Vacaville now, although neither Morna nor I want to press criminal charges. But it's beyond that now. The state attorney is involved, and she doesn't seem to care about family, only her career. There'll be television crews on the lawn and everyone's picture on the evening news.

Gus Wyler, Morna, and I were sitting in his booth at Dagmar's Donuts commiserating about the unwanted publicity.

"Talk shows are more my speed," Morna said. "Why I'll compare my thigh size to Oprah's any day."

Gus Wyler choked on his coffee.

I smiled and wondered what the bus terminal gynecologist would think of a sight like that.

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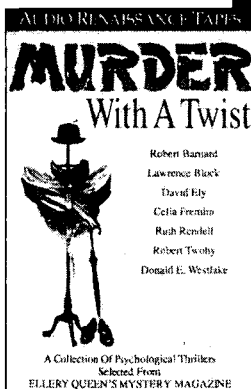
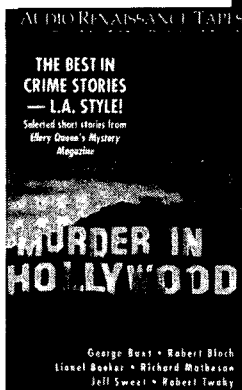
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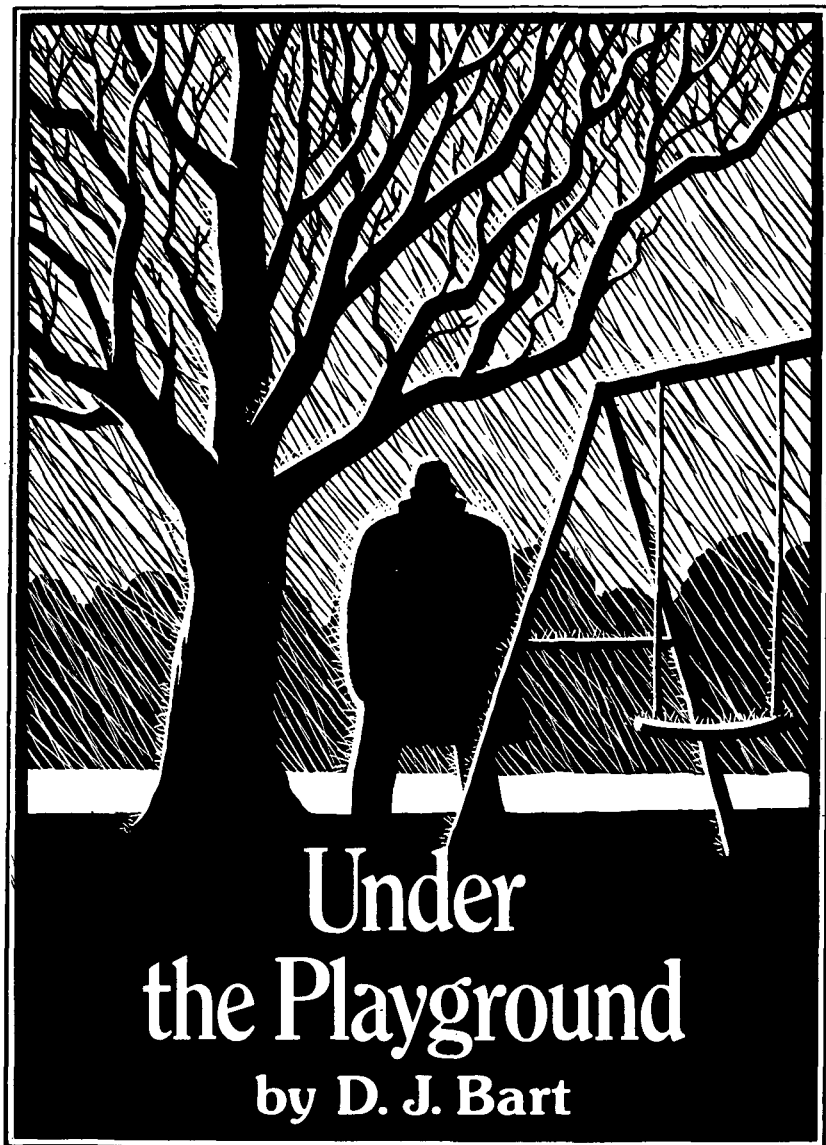
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FICTION



Under the Playground

by D. J. Bart

Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Butch, calling me at my mother's, saying he's sorry, "it being your old man's funeral and all," wondering if I'd meet him at the old playground, with a maddening confidence in his voice that left little doubt as to my reply.

About the best I could muster in the way of resistance was a feeble "... take me a while to get away."

I'm forty years old and, still, this cretin says jump, I look for a bridge.

Overhearing my obeisant reply, Mom wondered aloud, "Wendell, where're you going?—it's your dad's wake, for pete's sake, what'll people think?," patting the tightly permed curls above her left ear.

A bit optimistic on Mom's part. I glanced around at the meager gathering. The people there, just five men, were the other pallbearers. Any less attendance and we'd have had to hire movers to carry him from the hearse to the grave. Two of these guys were sleeping, two were arguing whether liquid hand soap needed to be antibacterial, and the other one was singing "Danny Boy" over and over again. Which was strange—my father's name had been Frank.

I left the wake, confident that I wouldn't be missed any more than my father.

My dog Megabyte and I, both damp from the mist, arrived at the playground with that old apprehension hammering away against my ribs. I didn't know if anything was hammering against Megabyte's ribs; he didn't know Butch.

This playground was the site of many an encounter with Butch Woodburn when we were kids. Mostly resulting in minor bloodletting—me being the minor letting out the blood.

I entered from the south, past the monkey bars, my hand gingerly touching the cold, wet steel. I felt a sense of awe, probably like a soldier feels as he crosses a battlefield he's survived.

Large as a child, Butch had since grown in all directions. He stood under the bare, rain-blackened branches of the off-limits oak at the edge of the playground, his yellow slicker dimly glimmering under a low gray sky, looking like some hulk of a crossing guard Mary Shelley might have imagined.

"Wendell Bilotraub . . . how ya doing, boy?" he inquired, glancing around, regarding me with the attentiveness one might give an individual snowflake in a blizzard.

"Hey, Butch, what's up?"

He grinned widely, exposing a textbook example of the results of gum disease. Three slightly askew incisors were all that decor-

ated the jagged smile across his round face. A little jaundice and he'd have looked like a jack-o'-lantern.

"Hear you're rolling in cabbage these days," my old nemesis told me, the smile collapsing into a sneer.

I shrugged. "I've been lucky with software," I said, reaching down to stroke Megabyte's sodden head.

Butch put his heavy arm around my shoulder; Megabyte growled deeply, his black lips curling, exposing a *healthy* set of teeth. He was a mongrel, but his loyalty to me was pure pedigree.

"What's the mutt's problem?"

"Doesn't like people touching me."

Butch removed his arm, all the while eyeing the dog, who continued to emit a low growl. "Remember that time you were going to do me in?" he asked, still holding Megabyte in his wary gaze.

Fear congealed in my throat. Who could forget perpetrating attempted murder? I wondered if he'd brought me here to do me in.

Ten minutes later, Megabyte and I were alone. I had needed to write two checks because the rain ran the ink on the first one. "Looks like ya been crying on it," Butch had said. That was the only time in my life I'd written two five-figure checks within two minutes of one another. I wadded up the smeared check and put it in my raincoat pocket.

My reflection was distorted in the rain-beaded surface of the slide, highly polished over the years by an army of tiny bottoms. The rain had intensified, pouring out of a dark sky as though punishing me for my submissive nature.

But I didn't see the gloom. I looked around. The playground now took on a bright, reminiscent glow under a long forgotten spring sun, from over thirty years before. . . .

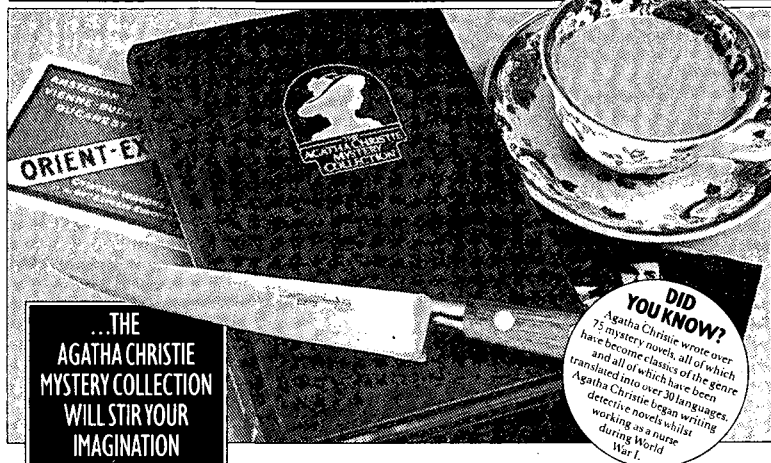
"Wow, Wendell, that's really big!"

I grinned at Mary Ann Harper over the top of my barely perceptible biceps, straining to make more of the meager flesh than was possible. Eight years old and I was already feeling an attraction for girls that prompted this kind of pitiful demonstration.

"Wanna feel it?" I asked, tugging my sleeve back, at the same time noticing her eyes widen, focused on something behind me. I turned—

—my arm ignited as a strong hand savagely squeezed the pathetic bulge of muscle I had been showing her. A large round face with "mean" written all over it appeared at my side.

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"Wendell Hercules himself," eight-year-old Butch said sneeringly, "trying to make a mountain out of a molehill," twisting my flesh until I cried out.

"That hurt, Butch!"

Mockingly, he repeated my declaration, "*That hurt, Butch,*" then punched me in the other arm.

"Leave him alone!" Mary Ann demanded, pushing at him.

He shrugged her off, glaring back at me. "You gonna let a girl fight for you, Bilotraub?"

My brain nodded vigorously while I reluctantly shook my head. That logical, rational part of me that would later in my life write software used by most businesses in the free world was more than eager to let a girl protect me. But the part of me that was related to my father insisted that I bow to the Law of the Playground and defend myself.

I swung wildly.

Butch ducked. Straightened. And then punched me square in the nose. Resulting in some of the bloodletting I mentioned earlier.

I stared at the tattoo on my dad's forearm. "Subic Bay," it read, with a ribbon beneath it proclaiming "Navy." Scar tissue from an old infection muted the two Y's in the tattoo.

Kneading a huge pale ball of glistening bread dough, he said, "Guess I better teach you to fight."

This from a guy with a white paper hat on his bald head.

"He's a lot bigger than me," I explained.

His face congealed into an expression similar to the one Butch had worn while pounding on me. "Who isn't?" he asked.

Family solidarity was an alien concept to my father. As were fidelity and sobriety. But most people swore that he was a damn good baker.

Going outside, I suddenly realized that if this persecution by Butch was ever going to end, it was I who would have to end it.

Similar incidents with Butch occurred over the ensuing years, all with the same resolution: blood and smiles. My blood, his smiles.

Junior year in high school. Thanksgiving, and my parents and I are sitting around the table staring at the plundered remains of some fowl. Turkey or duck, I think. After Mom cooked things, they were often hard to identify.

The damn-good-baker was on his second six-pack, and I could only imagine what the world looked like from behind those bleary

brown eyes. The smell of yeast hovered at his end of the table, enhanced by the flat odor of warm beer. And you could have practiced piano by the regularity of his belches.

The phone rang. Mom's chair legs scooted backward, rippling the worn carpet as she got up, and she left the room clucking her tongue at the empty beer cans in front of Dad.

A murmur and then, "It's for you, Wendell," she squawked loudly. More to make Dad wince than to make herself heard; the phone was right in the kitchen.

Butch Woodburn, commanding, "Meet me at the playground."

I figured he wanted to settle his Thanksgiving dinner with a couple of rounds on his favorite punching bag. But to refuse meant a reprisal of escalated proportions. Better to take a couple of shots to the arm than a full-fledged beating. Still . . .

"I'm sick of it," I hissed fiercely to myself as I headed up the stairs.

In my room, feeling a strange determination settle over me, I groped under my socks for the Swiss Army knife my uncle had sent me from Germany. The red plastic handle peeked out from beneath a white sock. I grabbed it and headed for the tool shed, all the while marveling at the strange sensation inside my chest, as if someone had poured concrete inside me and it was quickly hardening.

In my pocket, the bulky knife lent a comforting ballast. Even though much lighter than the bivouac shovel in my hand, the knife gave me a sense of balance. Buoyed by this feeling, I strode purposefully through the leafstrewn streets.

Nearing the schoolyard I passed Mr. Irwin, the laconic pharmacist, out burning leaves on the brick street. He gave me the obligatory nod of the merchant and then kicked a clump of wet leaves into the fire, causing a cloud of smoke to billow up around him.

Embarrassed by his error in kicking wet leaves on the flames, he tried to stifle his coughing, acting as if standing in a cloud of smoke was as natural to him as filling a prescription.

Following the tendrils of smoke drifting ahead of me, I confidently headed into the schoolyard, somehow gaining a sense of competence at watching the folly of an adult.

"What's the shovel for, Bilotraub?" Butch inquired as he rose from his seat on the low side of the inclined seesaw.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice firm and steady.

He raised his eyebrows and said, "My folks were throwing turkey at each other and I didn't have anybody to hit, so I called you."

Leaning the shovel against the monkey bars, I pulled the knife from my pocket and quickly snapped it open. "Not today, Woodburn," I told him, squinting my eyes like Alan Ladd in *Shane*.

He laughed and then pointed at the knife in my hand.

I'd inadvertently pulled out the knife's corkscrew attachment. When I looked up again, Butch was closing in.

Ten minutes later I made my way home, mind filled with carnage—images of stabbing Butch repeatedly and then burying him next to the woods at the rear of the playground, envisioning him lying deep in the sandy soil next to the swings.

But the reality of the moment was somewhat different. I had a split lip and a bloody nose and a shoulder that, if not dislocated, was certainly badly wrenched. Butch now had my Swiss Army knife and folding shovel. And he was alive and above ground with undoubtedly a thoroughly settled stomach from the exercise of beating me up.

As I gazed out over the playground, the years passed, the bright fall day darkened into the present gloomy moment, and I felt the cold, sobering mist on my face. Wearily I put my sodden checkbook back into my suit coat pocket, leashed poor wet Megabyte, and headed for my mother's house.

That night was sleepless, hours of staring at a darkened ceiling, thoughts filled with regret and shame. I had given ten thousand dollars to the same brutish schlepper who had made my childhood a nightmare. As I watched the eastern sky turn pink with the promise of morning, I decided I would have to murder Butch—if for no other reason than to be able to get some sleep.

And this time I wouldn't fail.

"Meet me at the playground," I told him later in the day, and hung up the phone.

Late afternoon. Megabyte ran ahead as we headed for the grade school. I felt strangely relieved. I didn't need a rationale for what I was contemplating; here I was, a grown man with a fortune made in software, and my pride lay buried under a playground. All that money and success and still I couldn't look in the mirror with any sense of real accomplishment.

As Megabyte and I passed the Irwin place, I noticed the old pharmacist sitting on the porch in a swing, sound asleep. I remem-

bered the time I'd made this trek to the schoolyard, murderous thoughts raging through my adolescent mind.

A young boy, presumably his grandson, was stuffing leaves into a garbage bag in deference to a no-burn ordinance. The air was strangely vapid, being absent of smoke, and the bricks of the street had been paved over with characterless blacktop. Many of the trees had fallen to Dutch elm disease.

A sense of vacuity prevailed, as if my memories had deserted me, supplanted by these images of dubious progress. And with it, uncertainty. Feeling a quiet longing for the sweet smell of burning leaves and the quaint pattern of brick streets, I hesitated for a moment before entering the playground.

Butch was lying back on the slide gazing at the gray clouds roiling above in preparation for a storm. The wind had freshened, and a small dust devil whipped through the sandy area next to the swings. The dirt there was loose and would be easy to dig.

Megabyte stopped ten yards away and growled at the hulk reclining on the slide. And, had I been capable, I would have growled also. The uncertainty was gone.

Butch sat up and looked first at the dog, frowned, and then on to me.

"Bilotraub—wanna give me some more money or what?" he asked, his creased forehead pulled smooth by a wide, ragged grin.

The frown quickly reappeared, however, when he saw the gun in my hand—the .38 Dad had always kept next to the register in the bakery. Then his beady gray orbs flitted over to my other hand, the one holding the shovel.

All the bloody noses and split lips and aches and pains from the past seemed to coalesce into a single throbbing, as if my heart had swollen and spread throughout my body, filling me with the hot sensation of near-bursting.

"I've had enough," I told him, raising the gun, steadily pointing it right at the center of his wide chest, and pulling the trigger.

It's dark, and I've just awakened, thinking life takes some really strange twists and turns. I mean, I thought killing Butch would be a great relief, but here I am, feeling as if a great weight is pressing down on me. It could be a belated sense of remorse, I suppose, but that doesn't explain the cold, damp feeling I have all over my body.

And that scratching noise. What the hell is that?

... and the smell of humus, like from a forest floor, seems to be surrounding me—a kind of earthy substantial smell—and I'm barely able to inhale. . . .

... *Christ!*—that demented mutant *buried* me, knowing I was still alive! Knocked me out and buried me!

I hope my loyal dog managed to bite Butch somewhere soft and painful while he was shoveling dirt on me.

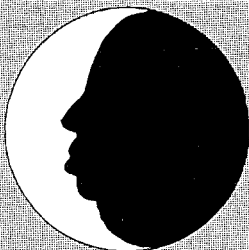
Maybe good ol' Megabyte will keep scratching and digging until he gets down to me. Can't be too deep—there is *some* air. 'Course, his attention span is limited, so I can't be sure if he'll stay with the unearthing or maybe be distracted by a squirrel or something.

I listen intently to the noise.

And, of course, the scratching sound stops. I try saying, "C'mon, boy," but dirt gets in my mouth.

All I can think of is: *next time*, if there is a next time, I'll be damn sure to check the gun first . . . make sure it's loaded. . . .

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Jeeves Takes Charge

by P. G. Wodehouse



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Now, touching this business of old Jeeves—my man, you know—how do we stand? Lots of people think I'm much too dependent on him. My Aunt Agatha, in fact, has even gone so far as to call him my keeper. Well, what I say is: why not? The man's a genius. From the collar upward he stands alone. I gave up trying to run my own affairs within a week of his coming to me. That was about half a dozen years ago, directly after the rather rummy business of Florence Craye, my Uncle Willoughby's book, and Edwin the Boy Scout.

The thing really began when I got back to Easeby, my uncle's place in Shropshire. I was spending a week or so there, as I generally did in the summer; and I had had to break my visit to come back to London to get a new valet. I had found Meadows, the fellow I had taken to Easeby with me, sneaking my silk socks, a thing no bloke of spirit could stick at any price. It transpiring, moreover, that he had looted a lot of other things here and there about the place, I was reluctantly compelled to hand the misguided blighter the mitten and go to London to ask the registry office to dig up another specimen for my approval. They sent me Jeeves.

I shall always remember the morning he came. It so happened that the night before I had been present at a rather cheery little supper, and I was feeling pretty rocky. On top of this I was trying to read a book Florence Craye had given me. She had been one of the house party at Easeby, and two or three days before I left we had got engaged. I was due back at the end of the week, and I knew she would expect me to have finished the book by then. You see, she was particularly keen on boosting me up a bit nearer her own plane of intellect. She was a girl with a wonderful profile, but steeped to the gills in serious purpose. I can't give you a better idea of the way things stood than by telling you that the book she'd given me to read was called *Types of Ethical Theory*; and that when I opened it at random I struck a page beginning:

The postulate or common understanding involved in speech is certainly co-extensive, in the obligation it carries, with the social organism of which language is the instrument, and the ends of which it is an effort to subserve.

All perfectly true, no doubt; but not the sort of thing to spring on a lad with a morning head.

From THE JEEVES OMNIBUS2 by P. G. Wodehouse, by permission of A. P. Watt Ltd. on behalf of The Trustees of the Wodehouse Estate.

I was doing my best to skim through this bright little volume when the bell rang. I crawled off the sofa and opened the door. A kind of darkish sort of respectful Johnnie stood without.

"I was sent by the agency, sir," he said. "I was given to understand that you required a valet."

I'd have preferred an undertaker; but I told him to stagger in, and he floated noiselessly through the doorway like a healing zephyr. That impressed me from the start. Meadows had had flat feet and used to clump. This fellow didn't seem to have any feet at all. He just streamed in. He had a grave, sympathetic face, as if he, too, knew what it was to sup with the lads.

"Excuse me, sir," he said gently.

Then he seemed to flicker, and wasn't there any longer. I heard him moving about in the kitchen, and presently he came back with a glass on a tray.

"If you would drink this, sir," he said, with a kind of bedside manner, rather like the royal doctor shooting the bracer into the sick prince. "It is a little preparation of my own invention. It is the Worcester sauce that gives it its color. The raw egg makes it nutritious. The red pepper gives it its bite. Gentlemen have told me they have found it extremely invigorating after a late evening."

I would have clutched at anything that looked like a lifeline that morning. I swallowed the stuff. For a moment I felt as if somebody had touched off a bomb inside the old bean and was strolling down my throat with a lighted torch, and then everything seemed suddenly to get all right. The sun shone in through the window; birds twittered in the treetops; and, generally speaking, hope dawned once more.

"You're engaged!" I said, as soon as I could say anything.

I perceived clearly that this cove was one of the world's workers, the sort no home should be without.

"Thank you, sir. My name is Jeeves."

"You can start in at once?"

"Immediately, sir."

"Because I'm due down at Easeby, in Shropshire, the day after tomorrow."

"Very good, sir." He looked past me at the mantelpiece. "That is an excellent likeness of Lady Florence Craye, sir. It is two years since I saw her ladyship. I was at one time in Lord Worplesdon's employment. I tendered my resignation because I could not see eye to eye with his lordship in his desire to dine in dress trousers, a

flannel shirt, and a shooting coat."

He couldn't tell me anything I didn't know about the old boy's eccentricity. This Lord Worplesdon was Florence's father. He was the old buster who, a few years later, came down to breakfast one morning, lifted the first cover he saw, said, "Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Damn all eggs!" in an overwrought sort of voice, and instantly legged it for France, never to return to the bosom of his family. This, mind you, being a bit of luck for the bosom of the family, for old Worplesdon had the worst temper in the county.

I had known the family ever since I was a kid, and from boyhood up this old boy put the fear of death into me. Time, the great healer, could never remove from my memory the occasion when he found me—then a stripling of fifteen—smoking one of his special cigars in the stables. He got after me with a hunting crop just at the moment when I was beginning to realize that what I wanted most on earth was solitude and repose, and chased me more than a mile across difficult country. If there was a flaw, so to speak, in the pure joy of being engaged to Florence, it was the fact that she rather took after her father, and one was never certain when she might erupt. She had a wonderful profile, though.

"Lady Florence and I are engaged, Jeeves," I said.

"Indeed, sir?"

You know, there was a kind of rummy something about his manner. Perfectly all right and all that, but not what you'd call chirpy. It somehow gave me the impression that he wasn't keen on Florence. Well, of course, it wasn't my business. I supposed that while he had been valeting old Worplesdon she must have trodden on his toes in some way. Florence was a dear girl, and, seen sideways, most awfully goodlooking; but if she had a fault, it was a tendency to be a bit imperious with the domestic staff.

At this point in the proceedings there was another ring at the front door. Jeeves shimmered out and came back with a telegram. I opened it. It ran:

*Return immediately. Extremely urgent. Catch first train.
Florence.*

"Rum!" I said.

"Sir?"

"Oh, nothing!"

It shows how little I knew Jeeves in those days that I didn't go a bit deeper into the matter with him. Nowadays I would never dream of reading a rummy communication without asking him what he thought of it. And this one was devilish odd. What I mean is, Florence knew I was going back to Easeby the day after tomorrow, anyway; so why the hurry call? Something must have happened, of course; but I couldn't see what on earth it could be.

"Jeeves," I said, "we shall be going down to Easeby this afternoon. Can you manage it?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You can get your packing done and all that?"

"Without difficulty, sir. Which suit will you wear for the journey?"

"This one."

I had on a rather sprightly young check that morning, to which I was a good deal attached; I fancied it, in fact, more than a little. It was perhaps rather sudden till you got used to it but, nevertheless, an extremely sound effort, which many lads at the club and elsewhere had admired unrestrainedly.

"Very good, sir."

Again there was that kind of rummy something in his manner. It was the way he said it, don't you know. He didn't like the suit. I pulled myself together to assert myself. Something seemed to tell me that, unless I was jolly careful and nipped this lad in the bud, he would be starting to boss me. He had the aspect of a distinctly resolute blighter.

Well, I wasn't going to have any of that sort of thing, by Jove! I'd seen so many cases of fellows who had become perfect slaves to their valets. I remember poor old Aubrey Fothergill telling me—with absolute tears in his eyes, poor chap!—one night at the club, that he had been compelled to give up a favorite pair of brown shoes simply because Meekyn, his man, disapproved of them. You have to keep these fellows in their place, don't you know. You have to work the good old iron-hand-in-the-velvet-glove wheeze. If you give them a what's-its-name, they take a thingummy.

"Don't you like this suit, Jeeves?" I said coldly.

"Oh yes, sir."

"Well, what don't you like about it?"

"It is a very nice suit, sir."

"Well, what's wrong with it? Out with it, dash it!"

"If I might make the suggestion, sir, a simple brown or blue, with a hint of some quiet twill—"

"What absolute rot!"

"Very good, sir."

"Perfectly blithering, my dear man!"

"As you say, sir."

I felt as if I had stepped on the place where the last stair ought to have been, but wasn't. I felt defiant, if you know what I mean, and there didn't seem anything to defy.

"All right, then," I said.

"Yes, sir."

And then he went away to collect his kit, while I started in again on *Types of Ethical Theory* and took a stab at a chapter headed "Idiopsychological Ethics."

Most of the way down in the train that afternoon, I was wondering what could be up at the other end. I simply couldn't see what could have happened. Easeby wasn't one of those country houses you read about in society novels, where young girls are lured on to play baccarat and then skinned to the bone of their jewelry, and so on. The houseparty I had left had consisted entirely of law abiding birds like myself.

Besides, my uncle wouldn't have let anything of that kind go on in his house. He was a rather stiff, precise sort of old boy, who liked a quiet life. He was just finishing a history of the family or something, which he had been working on for the last year, and didn't stir much from the library. He was rather a good instance of what they say about its being a good scheme for a fellow to sow his wild oats. I'd been told that in his youth Uncle Willoughby had been a bit of a bounder. You would never have thought it to look at him now.

When I got to the house, Oakshott, the butler, told me that Florence was in her room, watching her maid pack. Apparently there was a dance on at a house about twenty miles away that night, and she was motoring over with some of the Easeby lot and would be away some nights. Oakshott said she had told him to tell her the moment I arrived; so I trickled into the smoking room and waited, and presently in she came. A glance showed me that she was perturbed, and even peeved. Her eyes had a goggly look, and altogether she appeared considerably pipped.

"Darling!" I said, and attempted the good old embrace; but she sidestepped like a bantamweight.

"Don't!"

"What's the matter?"

"Everything's the matter! Bertie, you remember asking me, when you left, to make myself pleasant to your uncle?"

"Yes."

The idea being, of course, that as at that time I was more or less dependent on Uncle Willoughby I couldn't very well marry without his approval. And though I knew he wouldn't have any objection to Florence, having known her father since they were at Oxford together, I hadn't wanted to take any chances; so I had told her to make an effort to fascinate the old boy.

"You told me it would please him particularly if I asked him to read me some of his history of the family."

"Wasn't he pleased?"

"He was delighted. He finished writing the thing yesterday afternoon, and read me nearly all of it last night. I have never had such a shock in my life. The book is an outrage. It is impossible. It is horrible!"

"But, dash it, the family weren't so bad as all that."

"It is not a history of the family at all. Your uncle has written his reminiscences! He calls them *Recollections of a Long Life!*"

I began to understand. As I say, Uncle Willoughby had been somewhat on the tabasco side as a young man, and it began to look as if he might have turned out something pretty fruity if he had started recollecting his long life.

"If half of what he has written is true," said Florence, "your uncle's youth must have been perfectly appalling. The moment we began to read, he plunged straight into a most scandalous story of how he and my father were thrown out of a music hall in 1887!"

"Why?"

"I decline to tell you why."

It must have been something pretty bad. It took a lot to make them chuck people out of music halls in 1887.

"Your uncle specifically states that Father had drunk a quart and a half of champagne before beginning the evening," she went on. "The book is full of stories like that. There is a dreadful one about Lord Emsworth."

"Lord Emsworth? Not the one we know? Not the one at Blandings?"

A most respectable old Johnnie, don't you know. Doesn't do a thing nowadays but dig in the garden with a spud.

"The very same. That is what makes the book so unspeakable. It is full of stories about people one knows who are the essence of propriety today, but who seem to have behaved, when they were in London in the eighties, in a manner that would not have been tolerated in the fo'c'sle of a whaler. Your uncle seems to remember everything disgraceful that happened to anybody when he was in his early twenties. There is a story about Sir Stanley Gervase-Gervase at Rosherville Gardens which is ghastly in its perfection of detail. It seems that Sir Stanley—but I can't tell you!"

"Have a dash!"

"No!"

"Oh well, I shouldn't worry. No publisher will print the book if it's as bad as all that."

"On the contrary, your uncle told me that all negotiations are settled with Riggs and Ballinger, and he's sending off the manuscript tomorrow for immediate publication. They make a special thing of that sort of book. They published Lady Carnaby's *Memories of Eighty Interesting Years*."

"I read 'em!"

"Well, then, when I tell you that Lady Carnaby's Memories are simply not to be compared with your uncle's Recollections, you will understand my state of mind. And Father appears in nearly every story in the book! I am horrified at the things he did when he was a young man!"

"What's to be done?"

"The manuscript must be intercepted before it reaches Riggs and Ballinger, and destroyed!"

I sat up.

This sounded rather sporting.

"How are you going to do it?" I inquired.

"How can I do it? Didn't I tell you the parcel goes off tomorrow? I am going to the Murgatroyds' dance tonight and shall not be back till Monday. You must do it. That is why I telegraphed to you."

"What!"

She gave me a look.

"Do you mean to say you refuse to help me, Bertie?"

"No; but—I say!"

"It's quite simple."

"But even if I—what I mean is—of course, anything I can do—but—if you know what I mean—"

"You say you want to marry me, Bertie?"

"Yes, of course; but still—"

For a moment she looked exactly like her old father.

"I will never marry you if those Recollections are published."

"But, Florence, old thing!"

"I mean it. You may look on it as a test, Bertie. If you have the resource and courage to carry this thing through, I will take it as evidence that you are not the vapid and shiftless person most people think you. If you fail, I shall know that your Aunt Agatha was right when she called you a spineless invertebrate and advised me strongly not to marry you. It will be perfectly simple for you to intercept the manuscript, Bertie. It only requires a little resolution."

"But suppose Uncle Willoughby catches me at it? He'd cut me off with a bob."

"If you care more for your uncle's money than for me—"

"No, no! Rather not!"

"Very well, then. The parcel containing the manuscript will, of course, be placed on the hall table tomorrow for Oakshott to take to the village with the letters. All you have to do is to take it away and destroy it. Then your uncle will think it has been lost in the post."

It sounded thin to me.

"Hasn't he got a copy of it?"

"No; it has not been typed. He is sending the manuscript just as he wrote it."

"But he could write it over again."

"As if he would have the energy!"

"But—"

"If you are going to do nothing but make absurd objections, Bertie—"

"I was only pointing things out."

"Well, don't! Once and for all, will you do me this quite simple act of kindness?"

The way she put it gave me an idea.

"Why not get Edwin to do it? Keep it in the family, kind of, don't you know. Besides, it would be a boon to the kid."

A jolly bright idea it seemed to me. Edwin was her young brother, who was spending his holidays at Easeby. He was a ferret-

faced kid, whom I had disliked since birth. As a matter of fact, talking of Recollections and Memories, it was young blighted Edwin who, nine years before, had led his father to where I was smoking his cigar and caused all the unpleasantness. He was fourteen now and had just joined the Boy Scouts. He was one of those thorough kids, and took his responsibilities pretty seriously. He was always in a sort of fever because he was dropping behind schedule with his daily acts of kindness. However hard he tried, he'd fall behind; and then you would find him prowling about the house, setting such a clip to try and catch up with himself that Easeby was rapidly becoming a perfect hell for man and beast.

The idea didn't seem to strike Florence.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, Bertie. I wonder you can't appreciate the compliment I am paying you—trusting you like this."

"Oh, I see that all right, but what I mean is, Edwin would do it so much better than I would. These Boy Scouts are up to all sorts of dodges. They spoor, don't you know, and take cover and creep about, and whatnot."

"Bertie, will you or will you not do this perfectly trivial thing for me? If not, say so now, and let us end this farce of pretending that you care a snap of the fingers for me."

"Dear old soul, I love you devotedly!"

"Then will you or will you not—"

"Oh, all right," I said. "All right! All right! All right!"

And then I tottered forth to think it over. I met Jeeves in the passage just outside.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I was endeavoring to find you."

"What's the matter?"

"I felt that I should tell you, sir, that somebody has been putting black polish on our brown walking shoes."

"What! Who? Why?"

"I could not say, sir."

"Can anything be done with them?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Damn!"

"Very good, sir."

I've often wondered since then how these murderer fellows manage to keep in shape while they're contemplating their next effort. I had a much simpler sort of job on hand, and the thought of it rattled me to such an extent in the night watches that I was a

perfect wreck next day. Dark circles under the eyes—I give you my word! I had to call on Jeeves to rally round with one of those lifesavers of his.

From breakfast on I felt like a bag snatcher at a railway station. I had to hang about waiting for the parcel to be put on the hall table, and it wasn't put. Uncle Willoughby was a fixture in the library, adding the finishing touches to the great work, I supposed, and the more I thought the thing over, the less I liked it. The chances against my pulling it off seemed about three to two, and the thought of what would happen if I didn't gave me cold shivers down the spine. Uncle Willoughby was a pretty mild sort of old boy, as a rule, but I've known him to cut up rough, and, by Jove, he was scheduled to extend himself if he caught me trying to get away with his life work.

It wasn't till nearly four that he toddled out of the library with the parcel under his arm, put it on the table, and toddled off again. I was hiding a bit to the southeast at the moment, behind a suit of armor. I bounded out and legged it for the table. Then I nipped upstairs to hide the swag. I charged in like a mustang and nearly stubbed my toe on young blighted Edwin, the Boy Scout. He was standing at the chest of drawers, confound him, messing about with my ties.

"Hallo!" he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm tidying your room. It's my last Saturday's act of kindness."

"Last Saturday's."

"I'm five days behind. I was six till last night, but I polished your shoes."

"Was it you—"

"Yes. Did you see them? I just happened to think of it. I was in here, looking around. Mr. Berkeley had this room while you were away. He left this morning. I thought perhaps he might have left something in it that I could have sent on. I've often done acts of kindness that way."

"You must be a comfort to one and all!"

It became more and more apparent to me that this infernal kid must somehow be turned out eftsoons or right speedily. I had hidden the parcel behind my back, and I didn't think he had seen it; but I wanted to get at that chest of drawers quick, before anyone else came along.

"I shouldn't bother about tidying the room," I said.

"I like tidying it. It's not a bit of trouble—really."

"But it's quite tidy now."

"Not so tidy as I shall make it."

This was getting perfectly rotten. I didn't want to murder the kid, and yet there didn't seem any other way of shifting him. I pressed down the mental accelerator. The old lemon throbbed fiercely. I got an idea.

"There's something much kinder than that which you could do," I said. "You see that box of cigars? Take it down to the smoking room and snip off the ends for me. That would save me no end of trouble. Stagger along, laddie."

He seemed a bit doubtful; but he staggered. I shoved the parcel into a drawer, locked it, trousered the key, and felt better. I might be a chump, but, dash it, I could outgeneral a mere kid with a face like a ferret. I went downstairs again. Just as I was passing the smoking room door, out curveted Edwin. It seemed to me that if he wanted to do a real act of kindness he would commit suicide.

"I'm snipping them," he said.

"Snip on! Snip on!"

"Do you like them snipped much, or only a bit?"

"Medium."

"All right. I'll be getting on, then."

"I should."

And we parted.

Fellows who know all about that sort of thing—detectives, and so on—will tell you that the most difficult thing in the world is to get rid of the body. I remember, as a kid, having to learn by heart a poem about a bird by the name of Eugene Aram, who had the deuce of a job in this respect. All I can recall of the actual poetry is the bit that goes:

*Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tumty-tum,
I slew him, tum-tum tum!*

But I recollect that the poor blighter spent much of his valuable time dumping the corpse into ponds and burying it, and whatnot, only to have it pop out at him again. It was about an hour after I had shoved the parcel into the drawer when I realized that I had let myself in for just the same sort of thing.

Florence had talked in an airy sort of way about destroying the manuscript; but when one came down to it, how the deuce can a chap destroy a great chunky mass of paper in somebody else's house in the middle of summer? I couldn't ask to have a fire in my bedroom, with the thermometer in the eighties. And if I didn't burn the thing, how else could I get rid of it? Fellows on the battlefield eat dispatches to keep them from falling into the hands of the enemy, but it would have taken me a year to eat Uncle Willoughby's Recollections.

I'm bound to say the problem absolutely baffled me. The only thing seemed to be to leave the parcel in the drawer and hope for the best.

I don't know whether you have ever experienced it, but it's a dashed unpleasant thing having a crime on one's conscience. Towards the end of the day the mere sight of the drawer began to depress me. I found myself getting all on edge; and once when Uncle Willoughby trickled silently into the smoking room when I was alone there and spoke to me before I knew he was there, I broke the record for the sitting high jump.

I was wondering all the time when Uncle Willoughby would sit up and take notice. I didn't think he would have time to suspect that anything had gone wrong till Saturday morning, when he would be expecting, of course, to get the acknowledgment of the manuscript from the publishers. But early on Friday evening he came out of the library as I was passing and asked me to step in. He was looking considerably rattled.

"Bertie," he said—he always spoke in a precise sort of pompous kind of way—"an exceedingly disturbing thing has happened. As you know, I dispatched the manuscript of my book to Messrs. Riggs and Ballinger, the publishers, yesterday afternoon. Why I should have been uneasy I cannot say, but my mind was not altogether at rest respecting the safety of the parcel. I therefore telephoned to Messrs. Riggs and Ballinger a few moments back to make inquiries. To my consternation they informed me that they were not yet in receipt of my manuscript."

"Very rum!"

"I recollect distinctly placing it myself on the hall table in good time to be taken to the village. But here is a sinister thing. I have spoken to Oakshott, who took the rest of the letters to the post office, and he cannot recall seeing it there. He is, indeed, unswerving in his assertions that when he went to the hall to collect the

letters there was no parcel among them."

"Sounds funny!"

"Bertie, shall I tell you what I suspect?"

"What's that?"

"The suspicion will no doubt sound to you incredible, but it alone seems to fit the facts as we know them. I incline to the belief that the parcel has been stolen."

"Oh, I say! Surely not!"

"Wait! Hear me out. Though I have said nothing to you before, or to anyone else, concerning the matter, the fact remains that during the past few weeks a number of objects—some valuable, others not—have disappeared in this house. The conclusion to which one is irresistibly impelled is that we have a kleptomaniac in our midst. It is a peculiarity of kleptomania, as you are no doubt aware, that the subject is unable to differentiate between the intrinsic values of objects. He will purloin an old coat as readily as a diamond ring, or a tobacco pipe costing but a few shillings with the same eagerness as a purse of gold. The fact that this manuscript of mine could be of no possible value to any outside person convinces me that—"

"But, Uncle, one moment; I know all about those things that were stolen. It was Meadows, my man, who pinched them. I caught him snaffling my silk socks. Right in the act, by Jove!"

He was tremendously impressed.

"You amaze me, Bertie! Send for the man at once and question him."

"But he isn't here. You see, directly I found that he was a sock-sneaker I gave him the boot. That's why I went to London—to get a new man."

"Then, if the man Meadows is no longer in the house, it could not be he who purloined my manuscript. The whole thing is inexplicable."

After which we brooded for a bit. Uncle Willoughby potted about the room, registering baffledness, while I sat sucking at a cigarette, feeling rather like a chappie I'd once read about in a book who murdered another cove and hid the body under the dining room table, and then had to be the life and soul of a dinner party, with it there all the time. My guilty secret oppressed me to such an extent that after a while I couldn't stick it any longer. I lit another cigarette and started for a stroll in the grounds, by way of cooling off.

It was one of those still evenings you get in the summer, when you can hear a snail clear its throat a mile away. The sun was sinking over the hills and the gnats were fooling about all over the place, and everything smelled rather topping—what with the falling dew and so on—and I was just beginning to feel a little soothed by the peace of it all when suddenly I heard my name spoken.

"It's about Bertie."

It was the loathsome voice of young blighted Edwin! For a moment I couldn't locate it. Then I realized it came from the library. My stroll had taken me within a few yards of the open window.

I had often wondered how those Johnnies in books did it—I mean the fellows with whom it was the work of a moment to do about a dozen things that ought to have taken them about ten minutes. But, as a matter of fact, it was the work of a moment with me to chuck away my cigarette, swear a bit, leap about ten yards, dive into a bush that stood near the library window, and stand there with my ears flapping. I was as certain as I've ever been of anything that all sorts of rotten things were in the offing.

"About Bertie?" I heard Uncle Willoughby say.

"About Bertie and your parcel. I heard you talking to him just now. I believe he's got it."

When I tell you that just as I heard these frightful words a fairly substantial beetle of sorts dropped from the bush down the back of my neck, and I couldn't even stir to squash the same, you will understand that I felt pretty rotten. Everything seemed against me.

"What do you mean, boy? I was discussing the disappearance of my manuscript with Bertie only a moment back, and he professed himself as perplexed by the mystery as myself."

"Well, I was in his room yesterday afternoon, doing him an act of kindness, and he came in with a parcel. I could see it, though he tried to keep it behind his back. And then he asked me to go to the smoking room and snip some cigars for him; and about two minutes afterwards he came down—and he wasn't carrying anything. So it must be in his room."

I understand they deliberately teach these dashed Boy Scouts to cultivate their powers of observation and deduction and whatnot. Devilish thoughtless and inconsiderate of them, I call it. Look at the trouble it causes.

"It sounds incredible," said Uncle Willoughby, thereby bucking me up a trifle.

"Shall I go and look in his room?" asked young blighted Edwin. "I'm sure the parcel's there."

"But what could be his motive for perpetrating this extraordinary theft?"

"Perhaps he's a—what you said just now."

"A kleptomaniac? Impossible!"

"It might have been Bertie who took all those things from the very start," suggested the little brute hopefully. "He may be like Raffles."

"Raffles?"

"He's a chap in a book who went about pinching things."

"I cannot believe that Bertie would—ah—go about pinching things."

"Well, I'm sure he's got the parcel. I'll tell you what you might do. You might say that Mr. Berkeley wired that he had left something here. He had Bertie's room, you know. You might say you wanted to look for it."

"That would be possible. I—"

I didn't wait to hear any more. Things were getting too hot. I sneaked softly out of my bush and raced for the front door. I sprinted up to my room and made for the drawer where I had put the parcel. And then I found I hadn't the key. It wasn't for the deuce of a time that I recollected I had shifted it to my evening trousers the night before and must have forgotten to take it out again.

Where the dickens were my evening things? I had looked all over the place before I remembered that Jeeves must have taken them away to brush. To leap at the bell and ring it was, with me, the work of a moment. I had just rung it when there was a footstep outside, and in came Uncle Willoughby.

"Oh, Bertie," he said, without a blush, "I have—ah—received a telegram from Berkeley, who occupied this room in your absence, asking me to forward him his—er—his cigarette case, which, it would appear, he inadvertently omitted to take with him when he left the house. I cannot find it downstairs; and it has, therefore, occurred to me that he may have left it in this room. I will—er—just take a look round."

It was one of the most disgusting spectacles I've ever seen—this whitehaired old man, who should have been thinking of the here-

after, standing there lying like an actor.

"I haven't seen it anywhere," I said.

"Nevertheless, I will search. I must—ah—spare no effort."

"I should have seen it if it had been here—what?"

"It may have escaped your notice. It is—er—possibly in one of the drawers."

He began to nose about. He pulled out drawer after drawer, pottering round like an old bloodhound, and babbling from time to time about Berkeley and his cigarette case in a way that struck me as perfectly ghastly. I just stood there, losing weight every moment.

Then he came to the drawer where the parcel was.

"This appears to be locked," he said, rattling the handle.

"Yes; I shouldn't bother about that one. It—it's—er—locked, and all that sort of thing."

"You have not the key?"

A soft, respectful voice spoke behind me.

"I fancy, sir, that this must be the key you require. It was in the pocket of your evening trousers."

It was Jeeves. He had shimmered in, carrying my evening things, and was standing there holding out the key. I could have massacred the man.

"Thank you," said my uncle.

"Not at all, sir."

The next moment Uncle Willoughby had opened the drawer. I shut my eyes.

"No," said Uncle Willoughby, "there is nothing here. The drawer is empty. Thank you, Bertie. I hope I have not disturbed you. I fancy—er—Berkeley must have taken his case with him after all."

When he had gone, I shut the door carefully. Then I turned to Jeeves. The man was putting my evening things out on a chair.

"Er—Jeeves!"

"Sir?"

"Oh, nothing."

It was deuced difficult to know how to begin.

"Er—Jeeves!"

"Sir?"

"Did you—was there—have you by chance—"

"I removed the parcel this morning, sir."

"Oh—ah—why?"

"I considered it more prudent, sir."

I mused for a while.

"Of course, I suppose all this seems tolerably rummy to you, Jeeves?"

"Not at all, sir. I chanced to overhear you and Lady Florence speaking of the matter the other evening, sir."

"Did you, by Jove?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well—er—Jeeves, I think that, on the whole, if you were to—as it were—freeze onto that parcel until we get back to London—"

"Exactly, sir."

"And then we might—er—so to speak—chuck it away somewhere—what?"

"Precisely, sir."

"I'll leave it in your hands."

"Entirely, sir."

"You know, Jeeves, you're by way of being rather a topper."

"I endeavor to give satisfaction, sir."

"One in a million, by Jove!"

"It is very kind of you to say so, sir."

"Well, that's about all, then, I think."

"Very good, sir."

Florence came back on Monday. I didn't see her till we were all having tea in the hall. It wasn't till the crowd had cleared away a bit that we got a chance of having a word together.

"Well, Bertie?" she said.

"It's all right."

"You have destroyed the manuscript?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't absolutely—"

"Bertie, your manner is furtive!"

"It's all right. It's this way—"

And I was just going to explain how things stood when out of the library came leaping Uncle Willoughby, looking as braced as a two-year-old. The old boy was a changed man.

"A most remarkable thing, Bertie! I have just been speaking with Mr. Riggs on the telephone, and he tells me he received my manuscript by the first post this morning. I cannot imagine what can have caused the delay. Our postal facilities are extremely inadequate in the rural districts. I shall write to headquarters about

it. It is insufferable if valuable parcels are to be delayed in this fashion."

I happened to be looking at Florence's profile at the moment, and at this juncture she swung round and gave me a look that went right through me like a knife. Uncle Willoughby meandered back to the library, and there was a silence that you could have dug bits out of with a spoon.

"I can't understand it," I said at last. "I can't understand it, by Jove!"

"I can. I can understand it perfectly, Bertie. Your heart failed you. Rather than risk offending your uncle you—"

"No, no! Absolutely!"

"You preferred to lose me rather than risk losing the money. Perhaps you did not think I meant what I said. I meant every word. Our engagement is ended."

"But—I say!"

"Not another word!"

"But, Florence, old thing!"

"I do not wish to hear any more. I see now that your Aunt Agatha was perfectly right. I consider that I have had a very lucky escape. There was a time when I thought that, with patience, you might be molded into something worthwhile. I see now that you are impossible!"

And she popped off, leaving me to pick up the pieces. When I had collected the debris to some extent, I went to my room and rang for Jeeves. He came in looking as if nothing had happened or was ever going to happen. He was the calmest thing in captivity.

"Jeeves!" I yelled. "Jeeves, that parcel has arrived in London!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you send it?"

"Yes, sir. I acted for the best, sir. I think that both you and Lady Florence overestimated the danger of people being offended at being mentioned in Sir Willoughby's Recollections. It has been my experience, sir, that the normal person enjoys seeing his or her name in print, irrespective of what is said about them. I have an aunt, sir, who a few years ago was a martyr to swollen limbs. She tried Walkinshaw's Supreme Ointment and obtained considerable relief—so much so that she sent them an unsolicited testimonial. Her pride at seeing her photograph in the daily papers in connection with descriptions of her lower limbs before taking, which were nothing less than revolting, was so intense that it led me to believe

that publicity, of whatever sort, is what nearly everybody desires. Moreover, if you have ever studied psychology, sir, you will know that respectable old gentlemen are by no means averse to having it advertised that they were extremely wild in their youth. I have an uncle—”

I cursed his aunts and his uncles and him and all the rest of the family.

“Do you know that Lady Florence has broken off her engagement with me?”

“Indeed, sir?”

Not a bit of sympathy! I might have been telling him it was a fine day.

“You’re sacked!”

“Very good, sir.”

He coughed gently.

“As I am no longer in your employment, sir, I can speak freely without appearing to take a liberty. In my opinion you and Lady Florence were quite unsuitably matched. Her ladyship is of a highly determined and arbitrary temperament, quite opposed to your own. I was in Lord Worplesdon’s service for nearly a year, during which time I had ample opportunities of studying her ladyship. The opinion of the servants’ hall was far from favorable to her. Her ladyship’s temper caused a good deal of adverse comment among us. It was at times quite impossible. You would not have been happy, sir!”

“Get out!”

“I think you would also have found her educational methods a little trying, sir. I have glanced at the book her ladyship gave you—it has been lying on your table since our arrival—and it is, in my opinion, quite unsuitable. You would not have enjoyed it. And I have it from her ladyship’s own maid, who happened to overhear a conversation between her ladyship and one of the gentlemen staying here—Mr. Maxwell, who is employed in an editorial capacity by one of the reviews—that it was her intention to start you almost immediately upon Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound.”

“Get out!”

“Very good, sir.”

It’s rummy how sleeping on a thing often makes you feel quite different about it. It’s happened to me over and over again. Some-

how or other, when I woke the next morning the old heart didn't feel half so broken as it had done. It was a perfectly topping day, and there was something about the way the sun came in at the window and the row the birds were kicking up in the ivy that made me half wonder whether Jeeves wasn't right. After all, though she had a wonderful profile, was it such a catch being engaged to Florence Craye as the casual observer might imagine? Wasn't there something in what Jeeves had said about her character? I began to realize that my ideal wife was something quite different, something a lot more clinging and drooping and prattling, and whatnot.

I had got as far as this in thinking the thing out when that *Types of Ethical Theory* caught my eye. I opened it, and I give you my honest word this was what hit me:

Of the two antithetic terms in the Greek philosophy one only was real and self-subsisting; and that one was Ideal Thought as opposed to that which it has to penetrate and mold. The other, corresponding to our Nature, was in itself phenomenal, unreal, without any permanent footing, having no predicates that held true for two moments together; in short, redeemed from negation only by including indwelling realities appearing through.

Well—I mean to say—what? And Nietzsche, from all accounts, a lot worse than that!

"Jeeves," I said, when he came in with my morning tea, "I've been thinking it over. You're engaged again."

"Thank you, sir."

I sucked down a cheerful mouthful. A great respect for this bloke's judgment began to soak through me.

"Oh, Jeeves," I said; "about that check suit."

"Yes, sir?"

"Is it really a frost?"

"A trifle too bizarre, sir, in my opinion."

"But lots of fellows have asked me who my tailor is."

"Doubtless in order to avoid him, sir."

"He's supposed to be one of the best men in London."

"I am saying nothing against his moral character, sir."

I hesitated a bit. I had a feeling that I was passing into this chappie's clutches, and that if I gave in now I should become just

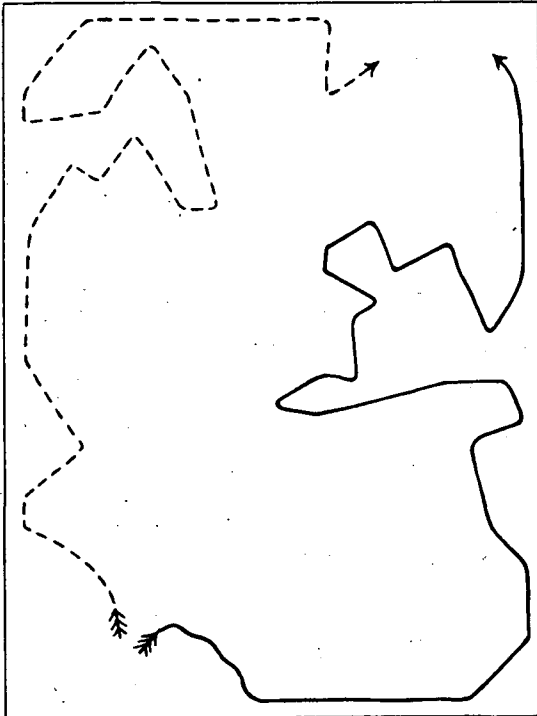
like poor old Aubrey Fothergill, unable to call my soul my own. On the other hand, this was obviously a cove of rare intelligence, and it would be a comfort in a lot of ways to have him doing the thinking for me. I made up my mind.

"All right, Jeeves," I said. "You know! Give the bally thing away to somebody!"

He looked down at me like a father gazing tenderly at the wayward child.

"Thank you, sir. I gave it to the undergardener last night. A little more tea, sir?"

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":



There are thirty-six guards.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



The PBS *Mystery!* series featuring the dour, incurably romantic Chief Inspector Morse of the Oxford C.I.D., has deservedly sent new fans to seek out Colin Dexter's novels, the basis for the TV series. Now you can pick up Dexter's latest book, **The Way Through the Woods** (Crown, \$20), a novel as long, complex, and richly dramatic as one of Morse's beloved operas. Morse is away on a rare holiday when an anonymous poem is sent to *The Times*, a poem that appears to be a puzzling clue to an unsolved missing persons case on the Oxford books. A year earlier, a young Swedish coed touring England unaccountably disappeared near Oxford. Pick this up if you relish mysteries with literary allusions, or if you want to see the long-suffering Sergeant Lewis get a crack at the case; or if you just yearn to see Morse, once again, turn out to be a loser in love. All this, and much more.

They used to call books like Elizabeth Rossiter's **The Lemon Garden** "romantic suspense" before the appellation fell out of favor. It remains the best description for this tale, however. A lovely actress and heiress, Joanna Fleming, wakes up from a car accident without her memory. As if that weren't dreadful enough, it quickly appears that she's also at the center of some sinister plot. Meanwhile, dear reader, as Joanna struggles with the dilemma of just whom to trust, you can cosy up with a box of chocolates and simply enjoy the view. Rossiter has set her story in sunny Italy and surrounded Joanna with a small cast of suitably rich and famous film folk (and let's not overlook two dashing men competing for her favor). For readers who grew up with Victoria Holt and Phyllis Whitney, *The Lemon Garden* is highly recommended. (Carroll & Graf, \$4.50)

Gallagher Gray's sleuths aren't romantic, but the teaming up of T. S. Hubbert and his eighty-year-old Aunt Lil offer the rich comic possibilities of every odd couple in fiction. Since **A Cast of Killers** (Donald I. Fine, \$20.95) is their second case, it appears as if T. S.'s retirement from a conservative Wall Street firm isn't going to be nearly as quiet and uneventful as the years leading up to it. First, his indefatigable aunt bullies T. S. into helping out at a neighborhood soup kitchen. There he becomes acquainted with a group of elderly actresses as well as a colorful group of neighborhood types. When one of the actresses is murdered, the police can find no trace of the woman's relatives. Indeed, she seems to have no past. Lil vows not to rest until she can save the poor woman from a pauper's grave. To that end she recruits the actresses—along with T. S., of course, and a motley group of locals—to track down the killer.

Food and mysteries just seem to go together like—well, bacon and eggs. Janet Laurence's novels move right alongside those of Virginia Rich and Dorothy Cannell in the clues-cum-cuisine crowd. Her latest is **Recipe for Death** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$17). It opens with Darina Lisle judging an amateur cooking competition, where she meets a talented young chef named Verity Fry. When Darina accepts an invitation to Verity's celebratory party, she also gets to know Verity's mother and sister, who together run an organic farm near the cottage where Darina is staying while writing her new cookbook. There's also Simon, Verity's former brother-in-law, who is struggling to keep open his new restaurant; and a cousin, who has a thriving herb business. Finally there's the mysterious Natasha Quantrell, an old friend of Verity's mother, who has returned after a twenty-year exile in France. Natasha was the cousin and housemate of a famous writer and culinary expert who died in the fire that left Natasha badly disfigured. Thus, when murder occurs, there's a whole menu of suspects. Along the way to the solution, the reader is treated to glorious discussions of food, its preparation, presentation, and the business of making a living out of cuisine.

The two writers who publish under the pen name of Emma Lathen have given mystery readers more than twenty novels starring Wall Street banker John Putnam Thatcher. The newest is **Right on the Money**, and fans will find that they get their money's worth here (Simon & Schuster, \$19). A potential merger of a big corporate client, represented by Thatcher's firm, with a small and very successful family-owned business gives readers a peek into

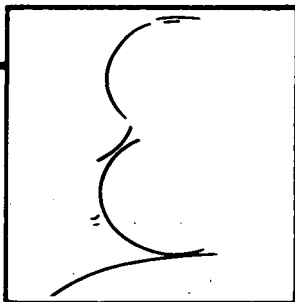
two disparate operations. At ASI, there are the predictable politics, bottom-lining, and jockeying for power that one expects of corporate life. At Ecker, there's a charismatic genius-inventor lodged as patriarch, surrounded by his subordinates, mostly relatives. When arson destroys Ecker's records, it's the first hint that this may not be a match made in heaven. Then one of the key players is skewered at a trade show with a barbecue tool used in an Ecker demonstration. Lathen reveals much of the suspects' lives, never giving readers many clues to Thatcher's. It is Thatcher, however, who puzzles out the motives, undoubtedly following a tried and true maxim: follow the money.

The business scene is also the background of Maynard F. Thompson's novel **Trade Secrets** (Pocket, \$20), which introduces P.I. Nason Nichols. Though the background is high-tech and the twisty plot involves industrial espionage in the 1990's, Nichols himself walks comfortably around in some very old shoes. *Trade Secrets* is a first-person P.I. novel sure to be enjoyed by fans of conventional, hardboiled detective stories.

Thanks to Robert Goldsborough, Nero Wolfe and his sidekick Archie Goodwin are still going strong. Now there's **Silver Spire** (Bantam, \$19), Goldsborough's sixth sequel to Rex Stout's beloved series. The story opens as Archie reluctantly obeys Wolfe's orders and turns down a case involving poison pen letters directed to a charismatic televangelist on Staten Island. Hoping to help out the worried executive from the Silver Spire church, Archie refers the client to an old friend and standby, P.I. Fred Durkin. In a private meeting, Durkin announces his controversial findings: one of the higher-ups, someone privileged to hold a chair in the Silver Spire's Inner Circle of Faith, has to be responsible for putting the anonymous threats in the collection basket. When challenged, Durkin responds hotly, and thus becomes the prime suspect in the murder that soon follows. Much as he'd prefer to tend to his orchids, drink his beer, eat Fritz's gourmet meals, and read big books, Wolfe is nothing if not loyal, and Durkin is one of his own. It's up to Archie to dig behind the altar screens to get the facts Wolfe requires before he can dramatically display his extraordinary talents at puzzling out the truth—in a roomful of suspects, of course. (The mountain goes to Mohammed this time, as Wolfe reveals the killer at the site of the murder.) The behind-the-scenes peek at a successful TV church and its methods of ministry is as much fun as watching Wolfe and Archie sparring.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Body of Evidence is a courtroom drama in which the smoking gun is none other than Madonna herself. The pop singer plays Rebecca Carlson, a woman whose sexuality is so dangerous that the prosecutor in her murder trial cautions the jury, "She is not only the defendant. She is the murder weapon itself."

Rebecca is a kinky art dealer charged with killing her wealthy, elderly lover. He happened to have a heart condition.

Her costar is the usually well-respected Willem Dafoe, who plays sharp defense attorney Frank Dulaney, whose wits are dulled by his client's dubious charms.

The fairhaired Rebecca's defense is that she really was in love with the old geezer, who died in the throes of pas-

sion—forensic evidence showed he was handcuffed to the bed at the time.

The prosecutor (Joe Mantegna) charges that Rebecca "seduced and manipulated" the victim into changing his will and killed him with "increasingly strenuous sex" and cocaine.

For Rebecca's part, she blandly tells her attorney, "I loved Dan. Why is that so hard for everyone to believe?"

The real question is a big "Who cares?"

During a working dinner Rebecca and Frank begin to expand their own relationship beyond the normal attorney-client one. Explaining how she first met her late partner-in-kink, Rebecca tells him she can pick out anyone in the room who goes for the same strange bedroom antics as she does. When Frank asks whom she's

discovered in that particular room, she demurs. "I can't say because he doesn't know it yet." The audience knows she's got him hooked, it's obvious.

But for all the heat supposedly being generated between these two, there's no fire and no chemistry.

Madonna tries to be a forties siren, but she doesn't have the voice, looks, or style of a Lauren Bacall. And doesn't even come close to matching the steam of a Kathleen Turner, a contemporary actress who set the screen asizzle in *Body Heat*.

Throughout the film, Madonna's character tosses off such gems as "I never know why men lie, they just do. Men lie." Or, after Frank tells Rebecca that their very kinky and passionate affair is over: "Just like that, like I don't have any feelings?" The split-second jump from dominatrix to wounded schoolgirl is beyond believability and provides one of several unintended laugh lines in the movie. Madonna's voice, in addition, is thin and often a monotone.

Madonna's assets as an actress are few; the ones she has are simply not enough to carry a serious thriller.

Another mystery that isn't

solved is what Willem Dafoe is doing in this movie. The talented actor looks lost much of the time and probably won't list this title on his resume.

The other unfortunate characters who fill out *Body of Evidence* include Mantegna as the straitlaced prosecutor—no, he's not into bondage, and he's unhappy that the accused gets out on bond.

Anne Archer, who so ably portrayed Michael Douglas's faithful wife in the spine-chiller *Fatal Attraction*, is the murder victim's secretary. She weeps a lot on the witness stand but is otherwise unmemorable.

Julianne Moore is Frank Dulaney's wife—yes, he is married, but it's not even clear at first whether the lawyer is married or Moore is his girlfriend.

The only actor who gives a performance worthy of a positive mention is Lillian Lehman as the no-nonsense judge stuck with presiding over the case.

As an accused killer and temptress, Madonna's Rebecca Carlson inflicts pain and pleasure on those around her. Unfortunately, *Body of Evidence* is painful to sit through, and the only pleasure it offers is when its ninety-nine minutes are through.

THE STORY THAT WON



The Mid-December Mystery won by William F. Smith of Honorable mentions go to ton, North Carolina; S. T. Sandy Flanders of Ft. Walton ard Laing of Newark, New Scarborough, Ontario, Canada; Bob Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Mike Drummond of Grass Valley, California; Richard A. Finlayson of Saranac Lake, New York; Mike Katz of Santa Barbara, California; and S.D. Johnson of Plano, Illinois.

ous Photograph contest was Garden Grove, California. William Mumford of Hooker-Miller of Tucson, Arizona; Beach, Florida; Charles Rich-

Jersey; Josephine Gonzales of

Photo by Alpinistas Keys

STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE by William F. Smith

Inspector Norman Goodenough descended the long, curved staircase that crossed over the narrow inlet and led to the garden patio on the lower side of the chasm. He stood on the flagstone terrace, facing the ocean, and contemplated the magnificence of his surroundings—the cool green foliage of the trees, the shimmering blue water of the Pacific bay upon which the late afternoon sunbeams were creating thousands of golden crowns. The enthralling beauty did little to alleviate the inspector's disgust with himself, and the brilliant day shed no light upon the most baffling mystery in his long, successful career.

Reluctantly he recrossed the stairs to the Huntington Chateau, stopping on the last step to regard what remained of the structure: the concrete foundation and the immense void which had been the basement.

A robbery or a murder Goodenough knew he could solve. But this was impossible! Sometime during the preceding week the entire mansion had vanished, and he and his associates had not one single clue, not an inkling of how the feat had been accomplished.

Dejected, he pulled a small cellular phone from his coat pocket and punched in a number.

"Mr. Huntington? Inspector Goodenough here. I'm sorry, but we have been unable to find a trace of your chateau. I'm forced to admit that this case is beyond the talents of ordinary policemen." He took a deep breath, then swallowed hard. "What you need is a good house detective."

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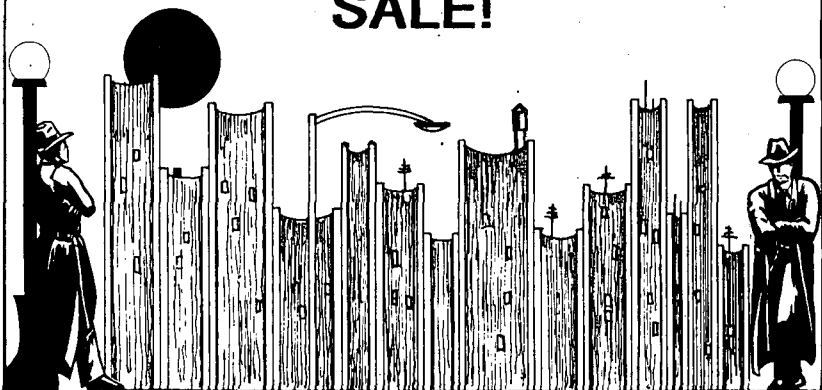
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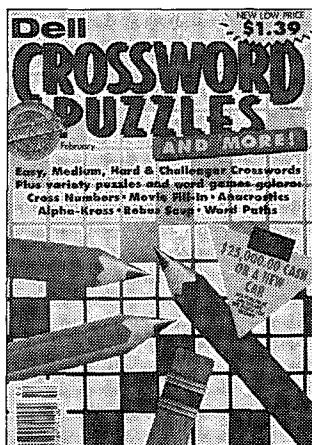
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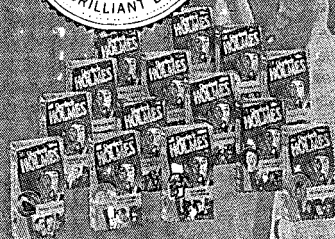
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